

How We Understand Alcoholism

A healthier life in Suppers for Sobriety requires only that you be willing to make good matches between your problems in the natural reality and personal solutions. Whether you think of alcoholism as a disease or not doesn't really matter to us. To get how we operate, you will need a basic understanding of the difference between the problems that set people up to become alcoholic initially and the "ism" that alcoholics develop as their lives and bodies succumb after years of drinking. In the beginning, alcoholics tend to be more different, and toward the end they tend to become more alike.

Many Slides into the Drink

A good analogy for how alcoholism develops is the waterslide park. In this representation, there are many different slides, each one defining the ride into alcoholism of a particular type of alcoholic. It's a very different ride for each type, but all slides ultimately dump the rider into the final pool, full blown alcoholism, if the person doesn't bail out in time.

The slide for the person whose depression is relieved by drinking starts out low and miserable, rises with each bout of drinking, and returns to depressed misery again and again. His is a zigzag slide of depression, relief, depression, relief, and so on. The person who is truly allergic to ethanol is said to be more likely a binge drinker. His slide will likely give him a bumpy ride of personality changes until he drops into the pool of ism. The person who primarily self-medicates for anxiety from low blood sugar or carbohydrate addiction, often a woman, may never get a wild ride or tolerate more than a few drinks. She might stay on the lazy river circling the pool for quite a while. Though she might never slide into the ism, she won't find it easy to pull herself out of the drink either, and she is very likely to experience both anxiety and a troubled relationship with carbohydrate foods. As we know from hearing so many alcoholics tell their stories, people have a wide range of reactions to alcohol. Some people have a huge capacity to tolerate alcohol right from the start and don't even get headaches or hangovers. They get a grand ride for years before their bodies break and they get dumped into the pool. Still others don't seem to succumb because of their biology. Those whose alcoholism manifests late in life are said by some researchers to develop the alcoholism for reasons having less to do with their genes and more to do with their life stories. Whatever their slide looks like, once they're dumped into the pool, they will more closely resemble all the other types of alcoholics, each of whom slid in with their own particular set of circumstances.

Once all these individuals – more different than alike early in their drinking – complete their hasty or long, zigzag or wild, inexorable or erratic slides into alcoholism, their medical, social and emotional problems make them more and more similar to each other. They share more similar problems related to the toxic effects of alcohol like digestive complaints, comprised immune systems, and dependence. They experience disconnections from the important people in their lives, social consequences, shame, and so forth.

What the water slide concept gives us is a way to consider the possibility that if alcoholism *is* a disease, it's several. Or at least it's numerous different kinds of biological and social vulnerabilities that land different people in the same disease of final destination, alcoholism.

If we are going to call all these different slides into ism by one name, the waterslide analogy offers a fluid, flexible understanding that more accurately represents the nature of the beasts. How we understand alcoholism has a big impact on how we seek to heal ourselves. It drives us to understand not what alcoholism is in any general sense but how each one of us was vulnerable to begin with. Those vulnerabilities are what await us when we become sober. Understanding the waterslide analogy invites us to match our personal solutions with the physical and social realities that led us into the drink to begin with.

How We Understand Alcoholism

How Loved Ones Can Help

Understanding how individual an alcoholic's slide into ism is also provides loved ones with some clear directions about how to be supportive. For example, whether or not an alcoholic started out drinking to self-medicate for anxiety related to poor blood sugar regulation, there is evidence that most alcoholics develop issues with blood sugar regulation after years of drinking. This helps explain the sweets and coffee cravings that plague so many alcoholics early in recovery. It also helps explain why there is so much overlap between drinking alcohol and developing diabetes. It's important for loved ones to foster a whole foods diet for any newly recovering alcoholics and especially for ones who have diabetes in the family, who are overweight, or who are anxious.

Each family faces a different set of challenges. For alcoholics who have no allergy to ethanol, a stop at the gas station is no problem. But for those who sank into alcoholism because they have the true allergy to ethanol, the whole family needs to know about ethanol-containing materials and help the alcoholic avoid them. To not do so would be sabotage because *any* exposure to ethanol can be as dangerous as taking the first drink.

Where there are deficits of specific neurotransmitters, alcoholics will need the support of their loves ones to get the food they need and the medical nutrition counseling they need to normalize their moods without creating new dependencies on dangerous substances.

The take away message: Understanding the path that led a person into alcoholism to begin with draws the road map out. Addressing specific vulnerability increases comfort and one's chances for long term sobriety.

Suppers Forum

The information used in the waterslide concept reflects some recent research in nutrition and psychology as well as information that has been available for decades. The story is still being written as researchers try on new theories. As new material becomes available about using diet and lifestyle changes to support long term sobriety, it will be posted on the Suppers Forum. Plausible information from outside sources and personal stories are welcome at our tables as long as there is no commercial message.

Regardless of which slide you rode into alcoholic drinking, there are a few really basic supports that can benefit just about everybody in recovery. At Suppers for Sobriety, we operate from the assumption that health requires attention in the three general areas of body, mind, and spirit: a diet of whole foods to repair digestion and provide the building blocks of healthy bodies and happy brains; good habits of mind to reduce stress and repair distorted thinking; and caring for the temple of the soul through the restoration of family tables and healthy human connection. As conventional treatment and recovery groups already emphasize matters of the mind and spirit, Suppers focuses especially on the orphan child of long term sobriety care, the body.

We are especially grateful to Joan Mathews Larson for her articulation of the concept of biological types of alcoholics. See Readings.