

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Alcoholism and Aging

Alcoholism in a family is a touchy subject. Denial is one of the most common symptoms of the disease. To make matters worse, many older people think that alcoholism is simply a moral weakness and not a disease.

In fact, an older body has more difficulty processing alcohol. Maybe your loved one has only been a social drinker, but as he advances in years, the same amount of alcohol packs more of a wallop and its effects last longer, because his tolerance level has dropped. A second factor is medication. Many older people take a variety of medications that shouldn't be combined with alcohol. An older person may also come to rely on the numbing effect of alcohol to deal with pain. While alcohol seems to dull both physical and emotional pain, it eventually compounds both.

Society has a better net for catching the younger alcoholic. The police stop him for drunk driving. The boss notices an employee's productivity is down at work. A husband or wife spots a spouse's problem and courageously speaks up. But an elderly person may not be driving anymore, is probably retired, and could be a widow or widower. The older person doesn't have to get up the next morning and face an employer. A widow doesn't have anyone else in the house or apartment to raise a question or an eyebrow as, day by day, the bottle is brought out earlier and earlier.

The temptation for adult children is to ignore the situation. It's bound to cause a fight, and maybe you're simply overreacting. After all, Dad doesn't have that much time left. Shouldn't his final years or months be happy ones? Drinking seems to be his only pleasure.

Experts on alcoholism answer those concerns this way: First, if you suspect a problem, there probably is one. It will only get worse. And second, your care-receiver is *not* happy. An alcoholic who is drinking is not a happy person. Those final years or months will not be happy for him or her if the drinking continues. In fact, drinking may be shortening your loved one's life. It's chipping away at his or her health and increasing the risk of accidents.

You need to keep an eye out for any warning signs of alcohol abuse: mood swings; general confusion; increasing isolation; bruises from bumping into furniture or falling; burns from falling asleep with a lit cigarette; a lot of empty bottles leaving the house; and "nesting," making one spot, usually a comfortable lounge chair, an entire world, with cigarettes, ashtray, TV remote, glass, and bottle within reach. Keep in mind that mood swings, confusion, and isolation can be caused by many things. But if you decide that your loved one has a drinking problem, you need to get professional help. Tell a doctor, nurse, or social worker about your concerns. All too often, if a family member doesn't raise the issue, it remains buried.

Al-Anon is there to help your family. Alcoholics Anonymous, especially groups for older people, may help your care-receiver.

It can be very difficult to bring up the subject of alcoholism with your loved one. Do some research and learn about alcohol and aging. Be prepared to give accurate information and have resource information ready. At this point in your relationship, there may not be a better way to show how much you love him or her. □

The Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with him forever in the next. Amen.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Visit **YourAgingParent.com** for more spirituality, information and resources for Catholic caregivers.

For a free copy of "The Little Book of Caregiver Prayers," send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: FSJC, P.O. Box 320, Mountlake Terrace, WA 98043.

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