

Can You Recognize the Signs of Problem Drinking?

Alcohol consumption has received growing attention in recent years. Increases in the amount of under-age drinking, college binge drinking, and drunk driving incidents are just some of the issues on which the media has focused. Yet, important as such stories are, for most of us the real issues are usually much more personal and closer to home.

As national consumption of alcohol has increased in recent years, there has also been an increase in problem drinking. Yet many of us have little idea of the signs that point to a drinking problem, or of what to do when such signs begin to appear.

It's not surprising that most of us find it difficult to check when our drinking may be the source of difficulties in our life. That's partly because the immediate effects of drinking are positive (i.e., feeling good), whereas the negative consequences tend to occur later (i.e., feeling hungover the following day). We tend to want to not put the two together.

One quick and easy way to screen yourself for problem drinking is a simple set of 4 questions devised some time ago by Dr. J.A. Ewing and known as the CAGE test:

- C:** Have you ever felt you ought to CUT down on your drinking?
- A:** Do you get ANNOYED at criticism of your drinking?
- G:** Do you ever feel GUILTY about your drinking?
- E:** Do you ever take an EYEOPENER (early morning drinking)?

Typically, if you answer "yes" (including answering "sometimes," and "every now and then") to two or more of these questions, you should be evaluated by a professional regarding your drinking. Some professionals believe that even a single "yes" answer to one of the CAGE questions warrants a formal evaluation. However, it is important to note that the CAGE questions are intended to "check" your need for a professional evaluation, not to diagnose yourself as an alcoholic.

Beyond such questions, there are also other indications your drinking may be problematic and that a professional evaluation is warranted:

- * **Awakening in the morning and finding you can't remember part of the previous evening**
- * **Having people who are close to you complain about your drinking**
- * **Having difficulty with stopping after one or two drinks**
- * **Getting into physical fights when you drink**
- * **Finding drinking causes problems between you and those close to you**
- * **Losing friends because of your drinking**
- * **Having a family member go to anyone for help about your drinking**
- * **Getting into trouble at work or school because of drinking**
- * **Losing a job because of drinking**
- * **Neglecting your school work, family, job or other obligations because of your drinking**
- * **Hearing voices, seeing things that aren't really there, or severe shaking after heavy drinking**
- * **Being arrested for drunk driving or other drinking related behavior.**

If you have experienced any of these signs or have answered "yes" to two or more of the CAGE questions, the first step is to get a professional evaluation. A professional counselor can provide such an evaluation and many specialize in assessing and treating problem drinking.

Your local mental health center or hospital should be able to provide a list of counselors. Or check in your local yellow pages under counseling professionals. Those professional counselors who specialize in substance abuse will typically have certifications in addiction counseling and will typically list their certifications in their ads. Several national organizations also provide referral information for professional counselors. The National Board For Certified Counselors (NBCC), (336-547-0607) and the National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (NAADAC), (800-548-0497) are two such organizations. The NAADAC web site provides a list of state associations of substance abuse counselors, including contact numbers. You may also wish to check the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's (NIAAA) web site, for answers to frequently asked questions about alcohol abuse and alcoholism.

Problem drinking can happen to anyone. The key is to recognize the problem early and to seek professional assistance. Taking steps as soon as possible can help reduce the painful consequences that almost always come with excessive drinking.

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R. Trent Codd, III, Ed.S., LPC, NCC is a mental health counselor in North Carolina working in both a juvenile justice substance abuse treatment program and in private practice. He is also an adjunct psychology instructor at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.

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