

The De-LAP Zone: Woman and Alcohol – Chilling Out vs. Chilling Reality

By: Carol P. Waldhauser

One late afternoon, a well-dressed, attractive female attorney stopped by my office. It was not long before the attorney, who I will refer to as Carol, lapsed into what seemed at the time to be a very private confession. Suddenly and without warning, Carol leaned across my desk and whispered: "I think my drinking has gone beyond chilling out; I think that I am an alcoholic."

It seems that Carol had a habit of "chilling out" by drinking wine late at night, alone, after a long day of work. She confessed: "In the beginning, I would pour one glass of wine; then suddenly that one glass of wine turned into a hardy tumbler of wine; and soon the hardy tumbler of wine became a bottle of wine, each and every night." Then Carol asked, "Does my chilling out have a chilling reality?"

Recent studies suggest women may be taking their relationship with alcohol too lightly. Moreover, soon there may be as many female as male alcoholics. There is a growing body of research linking as few as two drinks (or even less) a day to health problems and showing that alcoholic women are much more vulnerable than men to alcohol-related disease.

Ironically, the number of adult women considered heavy drinkers (two or more drinks a day) has declined over the past 15 years. On the other hand, there is a consistent increase in drinking among certain groups of women. In

1993, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse found that women who work outside the home are 67 percent more likely to drink heavily than homemakers are. A more recent study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse puts that number even higher, at 89 percent. Additionally, more American women are working than ever before. In 1960, less than 20 percent of married women with children under the age of six were working outside of the home; in the year 2000, that number increased to 65 percent and continues to increase.

One causal effect seems to be that the rate of heavy drinking in working women is due to an effort to fit into the male-dominated business world. An ongoing study by psychologist Sharon Wilsnack, Ph.D. and sociologist, Richard Wilsnack, Ph.D., University of North Dakota, School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Grand Forks. surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,100 U.S. women, 696 of whom have been observed since 1981. They have found that women in male-dominated occupations (any occupation that the U.S. Census measures as more than 50 percent male, including law and engineering) drink more than women in traditionally female professions such as teaching and nursing. Sharon Wilsnack suspects that the link between these types of jobs and drinking may not be coincidental. "In a male-dominated environment," she says, "drinking may be symbolic of gender equality."

Similarly, in another study entitled "*Lawyer Distress: Alcohol-Related Problems and Other Psychological Concerns Among A Sample of Practicing Lawyers*". Conducted by Connie J. Beck, Bruce D. Sales and G. Andrew H.

Benjamin and published in the Journal of Law and Health, Vol. 10, finds under *Female Lawyers* that:

“Nearly 10 percent of the practicing Washington lawyer sample are reporting levels of alcohol use that are likely to indicate current alcohol-related problems. As with male lawyers, however, this rate increases dramatically to 71 percent who are reporting a lifetime likelihood of alcohol related problems. Over the career span, the data reveals that almost three-fourths of female lawyers in the first three categories (those practicing up to and including ten years) are reporting a lifetime likelihood of alcohol-related problems.

Of course, it is not suggested that women give up their licenses to practice law in an effort to protect them from problem drinking. However, it is suggested that working women be educated on the subject. Working women should watch their level and frequency of consumption and fine-tune their radar for signs of growing dependence. “Drinking every night to relax is a major sign of trouble, even if you are not drinking that much,” Wilsnack says.

According to data from both the National Institutes of Health and the Office of Research Women’s Health: “Stress is a common theme in women’s lives. Research confirms that one of the reasons people drink is to help them cope with stress. However, it is not clear just how stress may lead to problem drinking...Many factors, including family history, shape how much a woman will use alcohol to cope with stress.” Evidence suggests also that depression

is closely linked to heavy drinking in women, and women who drink at home alone are more likely than others to have later drinking problems.

Remember, men and women were created equal; however, they will never be equal in their physical responses to alcohol. This is an area where there are true physiological differences, and it is imperative that women are aware of them.

Alcohol is much more dangerous to a woman's health than a man's. According to the National Institutes of Health and The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism:

“...among the heaviest drinkers women equal or surpass men in the number of problems that result from their drinking. For example, female alcoholics have rates 50 to 100 percent higher than those of male alcoholics, including deaths from suicides, alcohol-related accidents, heart disease and stroke, and liver cirrhosis.”

Subsequently, for all women, when heavy drinking turns into alcoholism, their health suffers even more. An alcoholic woman's liquor of choice will damage all her major organs, and once she is sober, they will take longer than a man to repair.

As for Carol, she was smart enough to realize that she was no longer “chilling out”. She was drinking alcoholically. Today, however, Carol knows that as a woman, her genetic makeup shapes how quickly she feels the effects of alcohol, how pleasant drinking is for her, and how drinking alcohol over the

long term will affect her health, even the chances that she could have problems with alcohol. For more information on this and other life issues call The Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program (De-LAP) (302) 777-0124 or 877-24DELAP or e-mail cwaldhauser@de-lap.org.

References:

Lawyer Distress: Alcohol-Related Problems and Other Psychological Concerns Among A Sample of Practicing Lawyers, conducted by Connie J. Beck, Bruce D. Sales and G. Andrew H. Benjamin and in the Journal of Law and Health, Vol. 10.

Alcohol: A Women's Health Issue, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health and National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

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The Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program (De-LAP) and the Delaware Lawyers Assistance Committee would like to announce two (2) weekly 12 Step Support Group Meetings for Lawyers and Judges, only.

Every Tuesday at 12 Noon

Every Thursday at 6:30 p.m.

These confidential 12 Step meetings are closed to the public.

For location and more information call either:

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