

Is Alcoholism Caused by Genetics or by the Environment?

Genetic and Environmental Factors

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), a person's risk of developing alcoholism is 60% determined by his or her genetics and 40% caused by his or her environment. Assuming that these statistics are accurate, what can be done to reduce the chances of becoming addicted to alcohol?

Genetic Causes of Alcoholism

Regarding the genetic determinants of alcoholism, those who say, "nothing can be done" are not totally correct. True, a person cannot change his genetics. Knowing, however, that there is a history of alcoholism in a person's family, for example, can help a person "prevent" this potential problem from ever starting if he practices total abstinence. This kind of preventative thinking is an example of a "proactive" approach to problem solving.

More Proactive Problem Solving

The following illustration, however, is an even more extreme example of "proactive" problem solving that can affect the genetic basis of alcoholism. Maria, a young lady who drinks very infrequently, starts to date a young man named Kirk. As their relationship develops, Maria starts to notice that Kirk gets drunk on a regular basis. In fact, Kirk gets intoxicated at least two or three nights every week. What is especially problematic about Kirk's drinking is that he gets angry and combative when he drinks excessively. On numerous occasions, Maria has tried to encourage Kirk to seek professional help, but each time she starts to discuss his drinking, Kirk gets extremely defensive, starts yelling at her, and then goes to a bar to drink with his buddies. After a year of riding an emotional roller coaster, experiencing numerous hurtful arguments, and going through many difficult alcohol-related situations, Maria finally decides to break up with Kirk. What were the major factors for the breakup? Maria wants to have children and can't see having them with a violent and angry man who is so dependent on drinking alcohol. Moreover, Maria figured that since Kirk is exhibiting such irresponsible behavior in a dating relationship, he could possibly get even worse if they were to get married.

In this illustration, by breaking up with Kirk, Maria has stopped a negative cycle from going any further. Stated differently, by deciding to end her relationship with Kirk, Maria "prevented" the genetics part of the equation from ever becoming an issue.

Concerning Alcoholism, Age Matters

Another important alcohol-related statistic articulated by the NIAAA is that the earlier a person starts drinking alcohol, the more likely she will continue to drink her entire life. This being the case, it therefore makes sense to look for ways that will significantly reduce alcohol abuse by teens, preteens, and by young adults.

An Environmental Framework

Employing an "environmental" approach (as opposed to a genetics-based methodology), higher education seems to be a logical starting point for ways to reduce alcohol problems manifested by our youth. Indeed, since many teenagers go to college and because teen alcohol abuse IS a serious health risk, it is relevant to ask what college administrators can do to significantly reduce student alcohol abuse, especially when teenagers are some of the main "offenders." It is suggested that the following reactive and proactive measures help address this issue.

Reactive and Proactive Measures to Help Reduce Student Alcohol Abuse

- Establish immediate consequences for excessive drinking.
- Discipline repeat alcohol abuse offenders.
- Monitor the drinking activities in the sororities and fraternities.
- Notify parents about their children's drinking activities.
- Talk to the owners of local drinking establishments so that minors and/or intoxicated students are not served alcohol.
- Eliminate mixed messages about alcohol (for instance, removing alcohol advertisements from stadiums and from sports brochures).
- Inform and educate students about the long-term negative consequences of alcohol abuse.
- Increase the number of alcohol-free social and recreational activities that are attractive to students.

Generalizing the Results

With additional effort and some more thought, it seems reasonable to think that alcoholism experts and college administrators will be able to generate even more ways to effectively reduce alcohol abuse at institutions of higher education. Once this is accomplished, moreover, perhaps their findings can be adapted so that they will "work" in other institutions such as junior and senior high schools, boy scouts, girl scouts, churches, camps, and so on.

Conclusion

If a person's risk of developing alcoholism is 60% determined by his or her genetics and 40% caused by his or her environment, it is asserted that the problem of alcohol addiction can be addressed from both genetic and environmental frameworks. Indeed, by using a "proactive" problem solving approach, the genetics part of the problem frequently can be eliminated. Furthermore, by focusing on various situational and behavioral factors, the environmental dynamics that help establish and reinforce alcohol abuse and alcoholism can be significantly reduced.

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