

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: My husband has always loved to party and he can put away a lot! He parties all weekend and still goes to work every day no matter how bad he feels. But as soon as he gets home, he cracks a beer and has one in his hand for the rest of the night. He's also been offering beers to our sons and their friends, all underage. My older boy can keep up with his dad and I often find them both keeled over in the man-cave full of empties. I'm worried that this kind of drinking could be harmful, especially for my son. Also, I recently heard that alcoholism can be inherited. My husband's dad was a heavy drinker. Should I be worried?

Answer: The short answer is ?Yes?. Recent research has shown that there are strong genetic predispositions to alcohol and other chemical dependencies. This means that at least some of the genes on your husband's side of the family are likely wired for addiction. Although such a gene may ?turn on? by itself, it is usually activated by what we call psychosocial factors such as watching a parent engage in addictive behaviour, bowing to peer pressure to use substances or trying to ?medicate? away stress or uncomfortable feelings. The heavy use of addictive substances (including alcohol) then further alters the brains of users to increase dependency (the felt need to continue or increase use).

Experts agree that the use of alcohol and other addictive substances adversely affects the brain. While intoxicated, heavy drinkers show impaired judgment (?I'm okay to drive?), reduced attention and alertness (memory impairment) and poor impulse control (?another beer won't hurt me?). Long term heavy drinking causes irreversible changes to the structure of the brain that often lead to pervasive problems with memory which can interfere with job performance and family relationships. Heavy drinkers can develop inflammation of the liver (hepatitis), irreversible cell destruction in the liver (cirrhosis) or pancreatitis. All of these conditions are life-threatening.

The brains of the young are not fully developed until somewhere between the ages of 24 and 26. Heavy drinking and the use of other addictive substances can interfere with the full development of young brains. Therefore, the brains of your sons and their friends are at even greater risk of harm from alcohol abuse than your husband's. Not only is it illegal to provide alcohol to underage teens, it is also immoral. Addicted teens are even more impulsive than adults and much more likely to inadvertently do harm to themselves or others while under the influence.

You don't say how your husband's consistent drinking affects you but many partners of alcohol abusers are lonely, unsupported and overworked. You may want to attend a local session of Al-Anon which provides information and support for people involved with alcohol abusers.

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