**WHAT ARE THE HIDDEN HARMS OF ALCOHOL USE? – DANIEL WAUGH**

For Christmas 2015, there were no sleigh bells. There were no merry drinks with family. There was no exchanging of presents. Instead, there was the sound of an ambulance. There were empty bottles of wine in my mother’s unmade bed. The only exchange was my mother’s medical history with the paramedics. There was no Christmas dinner. Nor were there any presents tucked underneath the naked Christmas tree. On December 25th, I found my mother lying at the bottom of the stairs with her ribs broken as a result from drinking too much alcohol.

My mother is an alcoholic. And she is not alone. Alcohol dependency and abuse is an affliction that permeates throughout Ireland with alcoholic disorders accounting for 10% of admission in terms of diagnosis of first admission into psychiatric units and hospitals in 2011. This is no surprise as alcohol consumption has nonetheless remained at very high levels (11 litres in 2014) and, as the economy recovers, it has begun to rise again over the past two years.

But if we look beyond the 10% of those who suffer with alcohol addiction we see a broader portrait. In fact, we see a family portrait and one with children in it too. Addiction within a family does not just affect the addict, but the entire family, friends and colleagues and even the community itself.

The *Irish Alcohol Diaries* survey, conducted by the Health Research Board (HRB), found that more than half (54%) of adult drinkers, aged 18 to 75, are classified as harmful drinkers and, when applied to the population, this is equal to more than 1.3 million harmful drinkers. Yet this does not mean 1.3 million of harmful drinkers are addicted to alcohol. To understand someone who suffers from alcohol dependency and addiction we must understand what it is first. Leaving the psychobiological jargon behind, the pharmacological effects of alcohol support reward and seeking behaviour that involves a limited number of chemical systems and multiple receptor sites in the brain.

The reward and pleasure centre of the brain sees an increase of levels of a chemical called dopamine, which makes someone feel good. So, the more harmful drinking that occurs the more the brain will begin to change and mould. Withdrawal from alcohol can take the form of hangovers, and the return of depression, guilt, shame and anxiety. Instinctively, alcoholics will continue to seek out the object of addiction to obtain the rewarding effects (stop feelings of depression, for example), as there is the persistent and compulsive use of alcohol, despite its negative effects on work, relationships, health or its legal consequences resulting in a chronic dependency and abuse. In short, the need to drink outweighs everything. For depression and guilt, drinking allows for positive reinforcement and a method of escape.

Eventually, alcohol acts as a chronic coping strategy for depression with the brain chemistry changing from repeated abuse, which can have a tremendous hold.

Sobriety is traded to escape depression, guilt and anxiety. A cruel tit-for-tat that has a hidden harmful effect on children of alcoholics.

I approached Conor Cullen, Head of Communications and Advocacy of Alcohol Action Ireland, to discuss how living with a family member who abuses alcohol is a hidden harm in Ireland. He explains “although not often visible in public, alcohol’s harm to others within the family can have very serious consequences for the safety and well-being of family members”. He continues, “it’s clear that while drinking alcohol is an individual choice, it is one that has significant social and economic impacts, and Ireland’s high level of alcohol consumption has an impact on all of us, regardless of our personal relationship with alcohol, with children particularly at risk”. Mr Cullen concludes, “The burden of alcohol harm is often experienced by those around the drinker, such as a family member, friend, co-worker or innocent bystander which care often children. Alcohol’s harm to others undermines public safety and is experienced in every community”. Today, one in eleven children in Ireland say parental alcohol use has a negative effect on their lives – that is about 109,684 children - while one in seven 18 to 40-year-olds said they often felt unsafe as a result of parental drinking during childhood.

Community services are available for those who wish to speak about being an addict, such as Alcoholics Anonymous. For those living with someone who suffers from alcohol addiction services exist such as Al-Anon. This space allows friends and family members come together and share concerns, stories and support. Like any mental health problem, a problem shared is a problem halved- where talking about the problem becomes a cornerstone to improved, better mental and physical health. You can escape that uncomfortable, invisible feeling of shame, anger and embarrassment before it manifests into something more. I carried these feelings and secret with me like a dark passenger for over 8 years because I did not tell anyone about the hidden harms my mother’s alcohol addiction was having on me on growing up. This had a negative impact on my mental health, and everyday life, until I opened up.

It is paramount that young people in Ireland open up about addiction in the home, and don’t use binge drinking to cope with the heavy feelings of guilt, shame and depression. Evidence shows that biological children of alcoholics are twice as likely to become alcoholics with Type II alcoholism (genetic factors contribute with an onset before the age of 25 and involves seeking alcohol to induce euphoria) emerging early in life and occurs in males only. Men are at greater risk to becoming heavy drinkers in young adulthood while leaving the large-effect “binge” drinking (consuming five or more drinks on one occasion) and even have the highest rate of suicide in Europe. I too experienced consuming alcohol to escape, and begun to use it as a method to cope which fostered depression and anxiety.

Yet there are abundant services available to help cope. But some of the best help is available right in your own group of friends and network. Blurting out what’s really going on can be terrifying, but boy does it feel good. You might cry, and that’s good too. SpunOut.ie have excellent resources online and how talk, and how to listen.

On Christmas Day 2015, I rang my friend and I explained what had happened. Until that phone call, I was angry and filled with such an immense sadness I was ready to explode. We talked openly about how I found my mother at the bottom of the stairs crying out in slurs to ring an ambulance, and how I was feeling. After a while of opening up, my friend proceeded to talk about her day. I smiled at every moment. I felt better because the feeling of shame, anger and guilt were lifted. On December 25th, 2015 I was lucky to have the gift of friends who I could talk to. So, start talking about how addiction in your family is affecting you, how you’re feeling and don’t let the feelings of shame, guilt and anger drag you down – rise above them and take control. Don’t let the hidden harm of alcohol abuse define you.

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