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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



Look for a Deeper Meaning When Addicts Offer Excuses

Alcoholics and other addicts use certain standard phrases to “prove” that they are not alcoholics or addicts. Superficially, their statements may appear valid, but when you look deeper, they contain the very contradiction they are trying to hide.

“I can take it or leave it” is an all time favorite.

This statement is often used by alcoholics/addicts to describe themselves as social drinkers, the implication being that alcoholics “have to have it all the time.”

Actually, the statement contains – and hides – a clinical truth: Although addicts are able to leave it – i.e. abstain or avoid the addictive substance or addictive behavior such as gambling, they are able to leave it only if they leave it completely. When they try to resume the drinking, drugging or gambling in moderation, they soon overdo it and have a relapse.

Thus, addicts are people who have only one option: They can take it – or leave it. They have to make an all-or-nothing choice. Non-addicts, by contrast, can take it – one or two drinks, gamble a predetermined amount, and so forth – and comfortably stop. They need not take any more drinks or gamble any more money for the rest of the evening – even though the drinking and gambling activities are continuing all around them.

Other favorite sayings are less popular because they hint at darker, more serious levels of addiction than the cavalier “I can take it or leave it.”

“I never drink alone.”

“I never drink in the morning.”

“I never drink before 5.”

For people who make such claims, a serious commitment to abstinence is required if they are to avoid the problem in the future.

The essence of the widely known “I never drink before 5” can be found in one form or another in the biographies of famous drinkers. A humorous version is attributed to Ernest Hemingway who, early one afternoon, said to his butler: “Bring on the drinks! It must be 5 o’clock somewhere in the world.”

Not surprisingly, addicts and alcoholics are not the only people who use such phrases to deny that there is a problem. The co-dependents and enablers – the addicts’ loved ones who play their own role in this chemical psychodrama – also have their stock phrases.

Here are some standard co-dependents’ cop-outs:

“He drinks a lot – but I’ve never seen him drunk.”

“He can really handle his booze.”

“After a night of drinking, he drives the others home.”

These phrases cover a more serious side of the problem because they try to hide the fact of alcoholic tolerance. It means that we are talking about an alcoholic whose liver cells, brain cells and other tissues, are accustomed to functioning in a high blood alcohol environment and therefore are being gradually destroyed.

“She swears off every Lent.”

“Sometimes he goes on the wagon for six months.”

“She never has hangovers.”

These sayings are usually offered by friends or loved ones to help the addict avoid the pain of discovery and the pain of recovery. The phrases also try to hide the “all or none” choice that removes the person in question from the ranks of social drinkers who actually can “take it or leave it.”

The phrase that sounds the most benign – “He/she never has hangovers” – is actually an ominous sign and a good predictor of future alcoholism. It says that the person in question has genetic or inborn tolerance and will not have hangovers until late into the disease.

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