

FOR THE WIVES OF ALCOHOLICS  
(AND FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS)

YAKIMA VALLEY COMMITTEE

ON ALCOHOLISM

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**DO'S**

**DONT'S**

FOR THE WIVES OF ALCOHOLICS

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If you are the wife of an alcoholic, your greatest hope is that some day your husband will be a reasonably healthy, happy, sober man. For years you may have directed your most concerned efforts toward this end.

But with an inadequate understanding of his illness, the fight may have seemed a blind and unfair one—mere stabs in the dark — resulting in the despairing knowledge that many of your efforts have done more harm than good.

Don't blame yourself for this. What you must realize is that both you and your husband are victims of an insidious illness which breeds confusion, despair and anxiety. It isn't a question of blame but of understanding.

Your solution lies in gaining knowledge of what you are up against. Once you have achieved this, you can come much closer to helping your husband toward a quicker and more complete recovery. But even if this does not happen, you will be able to create for yourself and your family a happier and more normal home atmosphere.

The following suggestions, based on present-day knowledge of alcoholism and the experience reported by wives of recovering alcoholics, will help you to develop a constructive program of action.

1. *Learn the facts about alcoholism.* You are a good deal more fortunate than the wives of alcoholics in the past who could only guess what was wrong with their husbands. There is much sound and unbiased information available today, and you should tap all the sources open to you. Some of these are: Alcoholics Anonymous, Alcoholism Research Foundation, sympathetic doctors and clergymen, social workers, wives of other alcoholics, and recovered alcoholics themselves.

2. *Develop an attitude in keeping with the facts which you have learned.* Intellectual acceptance of the facts is essential, but unless your knowledge reaches the emotional level, it will do little good. You cannot accept your husband as a sick man in need of help if you are still blaming him for actions resulting from his illness. In this respect, try to remember the alcoholic's intense feelings of inadequacy, and that attitudes of scorn, disgust, or impatience exhibited toward him only push him into further escape.



3. *Avoid "home treatment methods"*. These are not only futile, but extremely harmful in many cases.

*Preaching and lecturing—or nagging—and reasoning* are the most frequently used and most useless ways of trying to help him, especially when he is intoxicated. He may already be suffering from feelings of guilt incomprehensible to the non-alcoholic. He has already told himself all and more than you can tell him. To remind him of his failures, his neglect of family, his lack of social responsibility and social errors is more than he can take. For that reason he hears as much as he can bear and simply shuts out the rest. The alcoholic's thinking is mixed up whether he is sober or intoxicated. When you try to reason with him or demand certain behaviour of him you only increase his need to lie or force him to make promises he cannot possibly keep.

While refraining from preaching or reasoning, try to guard against a *"holier than thou"* or martyr-like attitude. It is possible to have this, without saying a word, but it isn't possible to hide such an attitude from an alcoholic. His sensitivity is such that he judges other people's attitudes toward him by small things much more than words—a fleeting expression, a tone of voice,

or even the movement of your body. No matter what your words, if you feel skepticism, scorn, shame or suspicion he will sense it and react. By the same token if he hears kindness and affection in your voice and actions, even when you are having to say something difficult, he will hear it and in time come to believe in it or to respond to it.

Another method of the "home treatment" variety is the emotional appeal, *"If you loved me . . ."* Remember his drinking is compulsive; it cannot be controlled through willpower. For the same reason it is equally useless to coax him, extract promises from him, or to threaten him. A word about the latter; don't threaten unless you intend to carry it out. There may be times you will have to take certain action for your own or the children's protection but idle threats only make him feel you don't mean what you say. Most often you don't and are just hurt, desperate, or angry. If you do need to carry out a threat be sure you think it through carefully and understand as fully as possible the implications in it for yourself as well as the alcoholic. So often what was intended to punish or shock him, only serves to hurt you.

Avoid, by all means, the temptation to hide his liquor



or pour it down the sink. No one act is a bigger waste of time and money. Besides pushing him into a stage of rage and desperation, you are only inviting him to find ways of getting more, which he will invariably do.

Don't let him persuade you to drink with him on the grounds that he will drink less; he rarely does and in any case as long as you condone any drinking on his part the easier it is for him to put off doing something about his alcoholism.

At best all "home treatment" methods only serve to relieve your feelings and usually drive your husband farther away from you and from getting the treatment he really needs.

4. *Talk to someone besides friends and relatives*, most of whom are prejudiced one way or another and often over-persuades you to a course of action or an attitude which leaves you more hostile or confused than ever. People who understand the illness, as well as your feelings around it, can best help you find answers to the many problems you have, as the wife of an alcoholic.

5. *Take a personal inventory of yourself, in much the same manner as members of Alcoholics Anonymous do.* Many wives have found this helpful, and report

that the inventory revealed surprising personal problems which weren't necessarily caused by their husbands' drinking. This statement, made by one group of wives of A.A. members, may challenge you—as well as give you comfort that you are not "the only one". "We wives found, like everyone else, that we were afflicted with pride, self-pity, vanity, and all the things which go to make up the self-centered person; and we were not above selfishness and dishonesty. As our husbands began to apply spiritual principles in their lives, we began to see the desirability of doing so, too."

It took much courage and self-honesty to face up to themselves, but they strongly recommend this action, painful though it may be at the time. If your husband is not yet on the road to recovery, it is perhaps even more important that you do so.

6. *Go to a treatment centre for alcoholics or to an A.A. group.* Both can help you as well as your husband. If there is a Wives' Group in either of these organizations, go there too. If you live in a community where there is neither clinic nor A.A., seek out a minister, physician or social worker who has some understanding of the illness and can understand your personal and family problems.



7. *Try to develop a more positive, thoughtful attitude towards him.* He may never be the husband you dreamed of but as long as you go on trying to make him into the kind of person you want him to be or think he should be he will likely need to go on drinking. Stop treating him like a child, because at times he acts like one. Don't deny him some "mothering" but at the same time remember he has many adult abilities which you have long since ceased to appreciate. Try to share the responsibilities you have taken over, rather than handing them back to him all at once. Begin to let him make decisions and ask for his help whenever possible. Remember the alcoholic feels a great sense of inadequacy and lacks confidence in himself; begin to believe in him and show him you need him—as you do, or you would have long since left him.

8. *If your husband begins to show interest in treatment* but is slow putting it into action don't make an issue over it. The same thing applies to a break from treatment. He needs to make his own decisions and to feel he has freedom of choice just as any adult would have. Don't try to push him or urge him into action but at the same time let him understand that you believe he is going to do something. Let him take the initiative and

the responsibility for making the contact whenever he is able to do so. Let him feel your belief in the success of treatment.

9. *Don't be jealous of the method of recovery which your husband has chosen.* You may have a tendency to feel that his love for you and the children should have been sufficient incentive for seeking recovery. Or, having had him dependent on you for so long a time, you may feel left out when he turns for help to persons outside the home. Remember that if he suffered from diabetes you would not expect to be his sole incentive for recovery, or his means of recovery; neither would you feel jealous of the doctor who was helping him back to health.

10. *Don't expect an immediate 100-percent recovery.* As in other illnesses, there's going to be a period of convalescence. There may be relapses, or dry drunks, and there will certainly be difficult days during which old tensions and resentments flare up again. If you can accept these as part of the illness, you will find that it takes less out of you and will help to prevent or limit another drinking bout.



11. *Develop and maintain a healthy emotional atmosphere in your home.* Bickering, nagging and tension make the home an unhappy place for you and the children as well as the alcoholic. If you are too absorbed in your own feelings or your husband's drinking, the children's relationship with you is affected. If your attitude to him is negative they take sides and become mixed up in their own thinking. They can often learn to accept, understand or enjoy their father in spite of his drinking. The atmosphere of the home affects every member but profoundly affects the alcoholic's recovery.

12. *Don't try to protect him against alcohol.* This is one of the quickest ways to push him into a relapse. If you warn other people not to serve him drinks, you will be stirring up his old feelings of resentment and inadequately all over again. He must still live in a world where alcohol is served; and he must learn, on his own, how to say "no" gracefully. By the same token, don't refer to alcohol or his old drinking habits unless he does. If he seems to want to discuss the subject, do so naturally and as intelligently as you can.

13. *Encourage his new interests and activities* even if you do not fully understand them. Without alcohol in his life he will have a lot of free time on his hands. Par-

ticipate in his new activities if he wants you to. Develop some new interests of your own or renew some old ones. Above all, try to find some new ways of enjoying life and of having fun together—that are not dependent on alcohol.

14. *Don't be too discouraged by the mistakes you make* or his inability to find contented sobriety quickly. Remember it has taken him many years to become an alcoholic and your old ways of reacting to him have become well established. The important thing is not to become apathetic or stop trying or you may become as sick or mixed up as he is. Two sick people can rarely help one another. Whether he can find permanent sobriety or not, there is a way to a more satisfying life for the whole family depending on the degree to which you and the alcoholic can use help.

15. *Pass on your knowledge of alcoholism to others.* Having suffered so much as a result of this illness, your influence can be great in helping non-alcoholics to comprehend the problems and needs of the alcoholic. If there are other wives in similar need who seek your help, give them your time gladly. By helping others, you help yourself. More important still, this growing

interest outside your own immediate problems will reaffirm your faith in God, in others (including your husband), and in yourself.

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## IF YOUR HUSBAND IS AN ALCOHOLIC

- DO** learn the facts about alcoholism.
- DO** develop an attitude to match the facts.
- DO** talk to someone who understands alcoholism.
- DO** take a personal inventory of yourself.
- DO** go to a clinic or A.A.
- DO** maintain a healthy atmosphere in your home.
- DO** encourage your husband's new interests.
- DO** take a relapse lightly if there is one.
- DO** pass your knowledge of alcoholism on to others.

- DON'T** preach and lecture to your husband.
- DON'T** have a "holier-than-thou" attitude.
- DON'T** use the "If you loved me" appeal.
- DON'T** make threats you won't carry out.
- DON'T** hide his liquor or pour it out.
- DON'T** argue with him when he is drunk.
- DON'T** make an issue over his treatment.
- DON'T** expect an immediate, 100% recovery.
- DON'T** be jealous of his method of recovery.
- DON'T** try to protect him against alcohol.

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