Fighting Addiction

by Lyndsey Duncombe, Charlton Communications

"Above all, do not lose your desire to walk; every day I walk myself into a state of well being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it." - Soren Kierkegaard

Recreation professionals have long known the virtues of walking, but now active living is becoming an important tool for problem drinkers as they are discovering you can walk away from alcohol. With this active living approach, the skills, energy and expertise of recreation professionals are becoming increasingly important in the field of treating alcoholism.

Just as people have many different reasons for drinking, there are several approaches to solving the problems associated with alcoholism.

Traditional 12 step programs advocating complete abstinence from alcohol have been challenged by experts such as Dr. Stanton Peele, a New Jersey psychologist, who has written several books on alcoholism and believes it is incorrect to treat alcohol addiction as a disease.

"People who are self-preoccupied in a negative way, who lack positive outlets and activities, and lack pride in themselves and their accomplishments, are more likely to be addicted," says Dr. Peele.

While many people in the health community are reluctant to let go of the 12 step methods which have worked for many alcoholics, Dr. Peele's assertion that alcoholism is best treated by combining physical and social activity is shared by many other professionals.

"Problem drinking should be thought of as a bad habit - people who drink too much need to learn a new lifestyle that includes active living," says psychiatrist Dr. Karen Spivak, administrator of the Drink Wise Program in the Toronto area.

Drink Wise provides people with healthy guidelines for alcohol consumption and is directed at "problem drinkers" who are not alcoholics, but whose behaviour puts them at a high risk for developing harmful drinking patterns.

Bellwood Health Centre is a private hospital in Toronto that, in addition to treating alcoholism, offers help for gambling and drug addictions, stress, eating disorders and other emotional problems. Bellwood, like Drink Wise, maintains physical activity is central in overcoming addiction.

Physical Activity is a Step Toward Recovery

Regular physical exercise can help people reach their alcohol consumption goals, whether they wish to adopt moderate drinking practices or abstain from alcohol completely.

Bellwood patients participate in aerobics, gentle stretching, volleyball, weight training, ice skating and nature walks.

"Physical fitness is the baseline of a healthy lifestyle," says Penny Lawson, Bellwood's Family Services Coordinator. She describes the life of an alcoholic as "a mosaic with holes in it and it's important to fill those holes with healthy activities, such as exercise."

Dr. Spivak agrees physical activity is essential to achieving a moderate approach to drinking. Drink Wise evaluates participants' satisfaction in life before and after participating in the program. Two areas participants notice the greatest improvement in their life are in physical fitness and recreational activities.

"People helping themselves and being healthy are unlikely to simultaneously harm themselves," says Dr. Peele.

"The danger may be that some excessive types then get into exercise in a compulsive, possibly self destructive, way," warns Dr. Peele.
Community Counts

Dr. Peele, Dr. Spivak and Penny Lawson each stress the importance of community services in treating and preventing alcohol addiction. One aim of Dr. Spivak’s Drink Wise Program is to help problem drinkers find new activities.

“Community services play a good role by providing alternative lifestyles,” says Dr. Spivak. Dr. Peele agrees. “I am a great booster of community involvement as a replacement, antidote, or preventative for addiction. Addiction is a preoccupation with feeding oneself, rather than how you can contribute to others,” says Dr. Peele.

At Bellwood, Penny Lawson also believes in the importance of community services.

Bellwood patients are provided with contacts for further community activities once they have left the center.

As Lawson explains, social interaction is particularly tough for the alcoholic who has acquired a group of friends whose social activities revolves around substance abuse. In such instances, positive community influences are important to prevent relapse.

Dr. Peele agrees that in social situations problem drinkers "need a plan, need alternative activities and associations."

Dr. Spivak distinguishes between two social categories of drinkers with different preventative and treatment needs. For those drinkers filling their time with drinking and participating in few recreational activities, Spivak says it is important they "get out there" and be introduced to new, positive ways to spend their time.

When the problem drinker is an active person whose physical and social activity is centered around consuming alcohol, social situations can be difficult. Such people need to carefully monitor their drinking in social situations, as well as follow specific guide-lines and regulations. For example, Drink Wise recommends the first drink anyone consumes in a social situation should be non-alcoholic, that way physical thirst is quenched without alcohol, and intoxication is less likely. It is also important for social drinkers to be introduced to activities where alcohol is not consumed.

Defining Problem Drinking

The following Drink Wise guidelines for moderate drinking allow you to have your wine, and drink it too!

1. Number of drinks* per week People who have 12 drinks or less per week are at low risk of developing alcohol problems. This guideline is not intended to stand on its own, but is subject to the constraints of the remaining guidelines.

2. Number of drinks per day Clinical research indicates that upper limits of four drinks per day for men, and three drinks per day for women, define the low risk range. There are two important conditions: first, these guidelines are upper limits, not targets; and second, they are subject to the upper limit of 12 drinks per week and to the remaining guidelines.

3. Number of drinks per hour On average, you "burn off" or metabolize 2/3 of a drink per hour. Additional alcohol accumulates in the bloodstream. Limiting yourself to one drink per hour, in combination with daily limits of four drinks for men and three for women, reduces the likelihood of becoming intoxicated.

4. Drinking daily Drinking every day, even in modest amounts, increases the risk of developing alcohol problems. Taking at least one day a week off from drinking is essential, and two or more abstinent days is encouraged.

5. Drinking and driving The risks of collision, injury, and death, along with the attendant legal consequences, mean driving with no alcohol in the bloodstream is the only option.

6. Drinking before or during work Drinking before or during work can reduce productivity and increase safety risks.

7. Drinking before or during sports or other physical activities Alcohol impairs the drinker's ability to think, react and coordinate actions, thereby increasing the risk of accident and injury.

8. Drinking during pregnancy There is no level of drinking known to be safe for the fetus during pregnancy.

9. Drinking while on medication Explicit permission from a physician or pharmacist should be obtained before considering drinking while on medication.

10. Drinking with the intention of becoming intoxicated Intending to be intoxicated is a significant factor leading to alcohol problems.

11. Drinking to deal with depression, loneliness, or stress Drinking to cope with difficulties or negative feelings is highly associated with the onset of problems. It tends to become a response pattern for dealing with unpleasant feelings and emotions, and is difficult to break.

12. Drinking out of habit Over time, drinking becomes a routine, pushing drinkers above the daily or weekly limits.

*(all drink references are in relation to the amount found in 1.5 ounces of spirits, five ounces of wine, three ounces of fortified wine or 12 ounces of beer). Drink Wise guidelines are reprinted with permission of the Drink Wise Program. For more information on the Drink Wise Program contact Dr. Karen Spivak, tel: (416) 229-4546; fax: (416) 229-1140. For more information on Bellwood Health Services contact 1020 McNicoll Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M1W2J6 tel: (416) 495-0926 fax: (416) 495-7943 North America Toll Free: 1 (800) 387-6198; website: www.bellwood.ca For more information on Dr. Stanton Peele, visit his website - http://www.peele.net