Lessons from the Counselor’s Couch

From November to February, we have several reasons to celebrate with family and friends: Veteran’s Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s and then there’s the Super Bowl. Holidays and traditions are exciting, fun and a great way to make new memories with those we love. We decorate, cook a lot of food, play games, take a million pictures and sometimes drink alcohol. There’s a ton of information out there about alcohol but how can we remember to keep things safe during the holidays? I know what you’re thinking…I’ve all been bombarded with the message of not drinking and driving. If this is true then why do addiction services providers keep busy doing DUI (Driving Under the Influence) evaluations for people being convicted of DUI?

In my career, I’ve discovered people aren’t as educated about alcohol as they think they are. Many times I hear people say, “I thought I was fine to drive” after they had been drinking and were subsequently arrested and charged with DUI. Most people don’t truly understand about Blood Alcohol Content or BAC. BAC is the percent of ethyl alcohol or ethanol in a person’s blood stream. For example, a BAC of .10% means that person’s blood supply contains one part of alcohol for every 1,000 parts of blood. What they don’t understand or want to understand is that the higher the BAC, the greater the risk for an impaired driving crash with a possible fatality.

To understand BAC a little better we need to ask the following question, what is a standard drink? One standard drink is equal to: one 12 oz can of beer at 5% or one shot (1.5 oz) of hard liquor or one 5 oz glass of 12% wine. People will tell me, “I only had three margaritas…” or they’ll say, “It was just two Long Island Iced Teas.” What they don’t realize, is there are three shots of hard liquor in a margarita and four shots of hard liquor in a Long Island Iced Tea. This means the margarita drinker really had nine standard drinks and the tea drinker really had eight. So…what does this mean about their BAC?

Click the link to view a graph regarding number of drinks and a person’s weight along with an explanation of BAC levels: [http://awareawakealive.org/educate/blood-alcohol-content](http://awareawakealive.org/educate/blood-alcohol-content)

But what does the graph really mean? Here is an explanation of BAC levels taken from the above link:

- **.020** - Light to moderate drinkers begin to feel some effects
- **.040** - Most people begin to feel relaxed
- **.060** - Judgment is somewhat impaired
- **.080** - Definite impairment of muscle coordination and driving skills. This is the legal intoxication level in most states.
- **.100** - Clear deterioration of reaction time and control. This is legally drunk in all states.
- **.120** - Vomiting usually occurs
- **.150** - Balance and movement are impaired. Here the equivalent of a 1/2 pint of whiskey is circulating in the blood stream.
- **.200** - Most people begin to experience blackouts
- **.300** - Many people lose consciousness
- **.400** - Most people lose consciousness and some die
- **.450** - Breathing stops. This is a fatal dose for most people.

Alcohol is easily absorbed in the body and reaches the brain quickly. The effects of alcohol are different for each person based on age, weight, gender, how fast you drink, whether you’ve eaten or not and other factors. It takes the liver one hour to process one standard drink. Low risk drinking is drinking no more than one standard drink an hour;
Lessons from the Counselor’s Couch continued

however, you need to limit that to two drinks per day in order to avoid health and impairment problems. So, to be a low risk drinker you can drink two drinks every day as long as they are an hour apart. It’s also important to know that your last drink will take about 45 minutes for it to take effect, or for it to “kick in.” This is because your liver can only process one standard drink an hour, so if you drink more in a short period of time, you won’t feel the full effect until about 45 minutes to an hour later. This, of course, will cause your BAC to rise. Alcohol poisoning is also caused by drinking too much too fast, that’s why an inexperienced drinker is high risk for being in a danger zone. When someone passes out, their body is actually shutting down and they are at risk for serious consequences - which can include death. Blackouts are also caused by drinking too much too fast; experiences are not stored in the long term memory therefore a blackout occurs. Blackouts are different than pass outs, blackouts are when a person has no memory of what happened.

You might be wondering what is low risk for drug use. Any illegal drug use is considered high risk. One reason is that we have no idea what a standard dose is because any dose causes impairment. If researchers did find what is considered low risk for drug use, most people wouldn’t use that dose anyway because it would prevent the desired effect of getting high.

Another factor people don’t really understand with drinking is tolerance and having a high tolerance is a liability and not an ability. Tolerance is a measure of how much impairment we experience at any given blood alcohol level. We all usually gauge our physical abilities to determine whether we’ve had too much to drink or not, i.e., unsteady gate, slurred speech, nausea, etc. These are physical signs of impairment but what’s interesting is that our mental tolerance is impaired long before our physical tolerance. Yes, we have two tolerance levels, mental and physical. By the time we’ve figured out we’ve had too much to drink, our mental abilities have been impaired for a longer period of time. The skills necessary to drive safely are impaired - the ability to see, process, understand and respond to situations. This is how someone with a high tolerance gets tricked into thinking they can drive safely; they are unaware their skills necessary for driving are impaired. Someone with a high tolerance is less sensitive to the effects of alcohol therefore making them less aware of how impaired they really are. This is true for all mood altering chemicals.

What should you do if you drink during your holiday fun? Have a plan. If you’re not planning on drinking, drive yourself so you can leave when you want. If you plan to drink get a ride to where you’re going so you’re not tempted to drive. Abide by the low risk guideline of drinking only two drinks and an hour apart, or line up a sober friend or relative to transport, or you could drink somewhere where you could stay the night. Don’t forget about the option of calling a taxi. What’s really helpful is that you could download the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s (NHTSA) Safe Ride mobile app (free from Itunes or Google Play) to call a taxi or friend for a ride home. The app also helps you identify locations if needed.

So when it comes to drinking, be mindful of your number of standard drinks. Remember, your mental tolerance is impaired long before your physical tolerance - so if you feel fine to drive, you really aren’t. And have a plan. Don’t allow yourself to be in a high risk situation where you or someone else could be in danger. Drinking and driving can destroy your life in an instant and no one is protected from it.

Shawn Meier - MRC, LAC
Supervisory Update

Top 4 Reasons Why Employees Don’t Use EAP

Your company has an Employee Assistance Program, a benefit to help find solutions for problems you encounter. Your EAP can be a valuable resource to you and your employees to assist in maintaining emotional and mental well-being and for guidance and support in a number of areas. Unfortunately, many EAP’s are underutilized. The top four reasons that employees don’t use EAP are: they don’t think it’s confidential; they feel there is a stigma for reaching out for help, they think they have to ask permission from their boss or HR, or they don’t know it exists. Let’s unpack each one.

1. Employees don’t think it’s confidential
   • Employees should know that EAP services are COMPLETELY confidential. Unless employees ask for a release of information, and sign appropriate forms authorizing that, no information can be shared outside the EAP office.

2. There’s a stigma for seeking help
   • This is especially true for males, who see this as a weakness. Educate your employees on the reasons for using EAP which can include but is not limited to: workplace stress, depression, marital problems, parenting difficulties, financial stress, grief, substance abuse, family stress, and illness.

3. Employees think they have to ask for permission
   • EAP usage is 100% confidential. Employees should never have to ask for permission from supervisors or HR. EAP is accessed by calling a phone number and scheduling an appointment. EAP is designed to be flexible and counseling can be done from your phone using video.

4. Employees don’t know about the resource
   • EAP services are generally covered in new hire presentations, but unfortunately are rarely revisited or educated on. A poster in the break room doesn't truly explain the benefit your organization has invested in for your employees. CHI St. Alexius Health EAP professionals can provide presentations annually to keep your employees informed.

Our EAP providers are a valuable resource and can offer insightful solutions to help your employees maintain a healthy well-being both professionally and personally. If you'd like more information, please contact us at 701.530.7195.

Professional Update

Stress and Social Media

In a 2017 survey, the American Psychological Association examined how social media has impacted the health and well-being of American adults. The survey showed that 99% of adults own at least one electronic device (including televisions), and 86% own a computer. Americans have increased social media use from 7% to 65% in the last ten years. The era of smartphones, Facebook, and Instagram has developed a new profile: the “constant checker”-individuals reporting constant checking of emails, texts, or social media.

An astounding 86% of respondents reported constantly or often checking emails, texts, and social media during a typical day. The attachment to electronic devices and the constant use of social media is associated with higher levels of stress. Constant checkers reported feeling more stressed and disconnected from their family, even when they are together than the non-constant checkers.

According to the survey, 65% of respondents agreed that taking a digital detox or unplugging is important to well-being, but only 28% reported doing so. The strategies for managing technology usage require individuals to set boundaries and self-discipline.

Strategies to Manage Technology Use
1. No cell phones at the dinner table
2. Take a “digital detox” by unplugging occasionally
3. No devices during time with family and friends
4. Turn off notifications for social media app