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**UNDERSTANDING
ADDICTION *to*
ALCOHOL**

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CONTENTS

Alcoholism and Alcohol Rehab Awareness, Compassion, and the Road to Recovery	4
Understanding Alcoholism	4
The Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol Abuse	5
CHECKLIST: Possible Signs of Alcohol Addiction	7
Long-Term Dangers of Alcoholism	9
Co-Occurring Disorders and Alcoholism	10
Alcoholism Effects More Than Just the Alcoholic	11
An All-Inclusive Process	13
Rehab and Treatment at Behavioral Health	14
Detox	14
Residential Rehab	16
Long-Term Residential Recovery	17
Outpatient Recovery	17
Dual-Diagnosis Rehab	19
Intervention	19
Family-Supported Recovery Methods	20
Alumni Programs	21
The Road to Recovery	2

ALCOHOLISM AND ALCOHOL REHAB

Awareness, Compassion, and the Road to Recovery

Understanding Alcoholism

Tori Hodge is a dedicated mother of two and a successful career woman, but that wasn't always the case. For eighteen years of her life, Tori struggled with a crippling addiction to pills and alcohol. "I come from a family of alcoholics, and I never really understood addiction and alcoholism. So I think I was born with this disease, with no fault of my own, and there was a hole inside me, and I felt really inadequate my whole life. When I found alcohol and drugs, I thought I had finally found the cure for my feelings of emptiness," she says mournfully.

Similarly, Jerry Murray spent years battling alcoholism that grew out of simple recreational use. "I found myself out of control and basically destroyed my life with drugs and alcohol," he says, his voice calm even with the severity of his statement. "I had a lot of things happen in my life which probably helped create that, but I come from good family, a good background, and I can't say there was any reason for me to have done what I did to my life except now I know I have the disease of addiction."

Alcoholism can be insidious in how it affects not only the life of the alcoholic, but the lives of their friends and family. Sometimes an alcoholic can function for years without anyone realizing just how pervasive their illness has become – not only because they may be actively hiding their addiction, but also because even in the twenty-first century, the majority of the American populace remains unaware of the signs, symptoms, and dangers of alcoholism.

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The Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol Abuse

There are two basic ways that someone can misuse alcohol – they can either have a behavioral disorder, more commonly known as “alcohol abuse,” or they can have an actual physical dependence on alcohol, which is the technical definition of alcoholism. Alcohol abusers typically have the ability to curtail their use of alcohol, but due to whatever external stimuli are driving them to drink, they typically are locked in a self-destructive cycle that can frequently lead to full-fledged alcoholism.

Jerry certainly found that to be the case. “It was like a recreational kind of use, and I thought I was having the time of my life. But what I realized is that at some point, other people would stop and go home or go to work, and I just lost the ability to do that.”

CHECKLIST:

Possible Signs of Alcohol Addiction

- Neglecting responsibilities in order to drink
- Use of alcohol in inappropriate or dangerous situations
- Mixing alcohol with prescription medication
- Being arrested for DUIs or public drunkenness
- Using alcohol as a relaxation or stress aid
- Avoiding family or friends in order to drink
- Unwillingness to stop drinking, even for a short period of time
- Uncharacteristic changes in behavior
- Excessive fatigue
- Sudden onset of depression
- Intestinal trouble
- Heart failure
- Liver trouble



Full-blown alcoholism is a frequent consequence of long-term alcohol abuse; as the body begins to adapt to the constantly heightened blood-alcohol level, it becomes physically dependent on the presence of that alcohol in order to function, even for the most basic of tasks. There are two major warning signs of developing alcoholism; first, as the body begins to adjust to the increased intake of alcohol, a person's tolerance of alcohol increases, and they find themselves needing to drink greater and greater amounts in order to feel buzzed or drunk. Second, once the body reaches high levels of tolerance and the dependency begins to form, a person will begin to go into withdrawal after even just a short time without drinking. Withdrawal from any chemical dependency can result in some potentially dangerous symptoms, which is one of the reasons that alcoholics need external help and support in order to safely quit drinking.

Long-Term Dangers of Alcoholism

One of the greatest physiological consequences of long-term alcoholism is the heightened probability of developing several severe chronic diseases or neurological problems. Over 25,000 people die from alcohol-related problems every year – and that isn't even counting the number of people who die from accidents or homicides involving alcohol use.¹ Frequently, older patients will be admitted to hospitals for one reason only to discover a complication that can be directly contributed to many years of alcoholism or alcohol abuse.

Some of the most severe health risks from long-term alcoholism are:

- Heart problems, such as cardiomyopathy or arrhythmia
- Alcoholic hepatitis
- Fibrosis or cirrhosis of the liver
- Pancreatitis
- Cancer of the mouth, esophagus, throat, liver, or breast
- Increased likelihood of diseases like pneumonia or tuberculosis²

Co-Occurring Disorders and Alcoholism

All too frequently, alcoholism is just one among several health issues endangering an addict's life. Depression, for example, can be more than just a symptom of alcoholism; it can in fact be the catalyst for someone to begin abusing alcohol. It is also sadly common for an alcoholic to develop an addiction to another substance – in 2008, the number of admissions to publicly funded treatment programs for primary alcohol abuse and combined alcohol and drug abuse were nearly identical. (18% for the former and 23% for the latter).³ Similarly, psychological disorders like clinical depression, anxiety, and panic attacks are common among alcoholics – in fact, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 37% of alcohol abusers suffer from at least one serious mental illness.⁴ The combination of alcoholism and mental disorders frequently creates a self-perpetuating cycle, no matter which came first in someone's life. Whether the alcohol was used to self-medicate depression, or the alcohol became a trigger for panic attacks, the disorders will build on each other and, if left unchecked, will increase in severity and possibly even in number.

“I had no scruples. I would lie, I would cheat, I would steal. If I made a promise to you, it didn’t matter, because I had no integrity. I would just change my mind and I wouldn’t even care how you felt about it.”

Another common problem among alcoholics, especially those dealing with co-occurring mental disorders, is that the compulsion to become intoxicated is so strong that the alcoholic’s mind will justify or rationalize it, even when their reasoning flies in the face of all logic or common sense. This compulsion greatly contributes to the deterioration of an alcoholic’s personal or professional relationships. Jerry discovered this about himself while in the throes of his addiction. “I had no scruples. I would lie, I would cheat, I would steal. If I made a promise to you, it didn’t matter, because I had no integrity. I would just change my mind and I wouldn’t even care how you felt about it.” It was this loss of self-control and integrity that led to Jerry’s marriage dissolving and, eventually, he found himself homeless and destitute. His family had turned their backs on him, and he had turned his back on his family.

Alcoholism Effects More

Than Just the Alcoholic

Alcoholism is sometimes referred to as a “family disease” because of its impact on family and loved ones. An alcoholic who refuses treatment is jeopardizing more than his own health; the parents, children, spouses, and friends of an alcoholic are all affected by the disease in one way or another. Even their coworkers can be affected – for example, if alcohol abuse is causing someone to repeatedly miss work, that can have negative effects on their entire company. In terms of familial issues, the most common result of an alcoholic in the family is abuse, which itself can manifest in many forms. Although TV shows and films traditionally show abusive alcoholics to be angry men who hit their wives or scream at their children, this is only one example of how alcohol can negatively impact a family.

The children of alcoholics, no matter their age, frequently exhibit anxiety or depression disorders, critically low self-esteem or self-image, phobias, and even have a significantly higher chance of eventually becoming alcoholics (or developing an addiction to another substance) themselves. These problems, if left untreated, will almost assuredly carry over into the child’s adult life, manifesting in ways that interfere with their careers, relationships, and even their ability to deal with stress.

Alcoholism can also have severe effects on the alcoholic’s

spouse or significant other. As with children, the spouse may begin to develop self-esteem problems, or even physical or mental illnesses. Families with an alcoholic parent frequently experience severe financial trouble.

Yet even with all of these problems caused by the presence of alcoholism in a family, sometimes it is the behavior of other family members that perpetuates the worst of it all. Some families, rather than suffer through the stress of dealing with the elephant in the room, will ignore and even enable an alcoholic, justifying their behavior by saying a little suffering is worth keeping the family intact. Eventually this denial can even lead to codependency – an unconscious addiction to another person’s (in this case, the alcoholic’s) abnormal behavior. ⁵

An All-Inclusive Process

The way that alcoholism affects an entire family is not just a cautionary tale against the insidious, destructive nature of addiction – it also means that when an alcoholic finally seeks treatment, they cannot truly begin the process of recovery without the support of and interaction with the rest of their family. The forgiveness and love of family members is a powerful motivator for someone struggling with the demon of addiction.⁶ “One of the things that I am so grateful for is that I’ve been able to rebuild the relationship and regain the trust of my mom,” says Jerry, as he looks back on the

long years that led to his eventual recovery. “Through all of the stuff that I went through and all of the bad, horrible things that I did, my mom never gave up on me. I think one of the greatest days of my life was when I was forty-four years old and my mom came and was there when I picked up my one-year sobriety medallion. And every year I give my mom my medallion. I just got my nineteenth-year medallion and I gave it to her.”

Rehab and Treatment at Behavioral Health

It was with the help of an all-inclusive recovery program like the one offered by Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches that Jerry was able to fix not only his relationship with his mother, but also his career and his health. There are many such programs throughout the country, but BHOPB’s is one of the best, as so many of the staff have the kind of compassion for their patients that can only come from a shared struggle. Speaking of his first time walking into the BHOPB facility, Jerry says, “I instantly felt like I had a breath of fresh air. I think the difference is the people that work there and the actual caring that there is for the patients, and the actual dedication to try to help the people.”

Detox

The detoxification process is the initial part of any

addiction treatment, and it involves overcoming one of the greatest obstacles of a patient's entire recovery journey – the chemical dependency. Although the pain and stress of detox can be somewhat relieved through some medications, and the BHOPB staff is fully trained to make the process as comfortable as possible, patients are still likely to experience a certain level of withdrawal. This is absolutely necessary, as mental recovery cannot begin while the body is still filled with toxins and dependent on alcohol to perform the most basic of functions. Patients undergoing alcohol withdrawal frequently exhibit some of the following symptoms:

- Intestinal distress
- Migraine headaches
- Hallucinations
- Tremors or heart palpitations
- Flu-like symptoms
- Insomnia

Attempting alcohol detox without medical supervision is usually a fruitless effort, as the severity of these symptoms can all too quickly force an alcoholic to fall off the wagon and begin drinking again – or worse, lead to severe injury or other medical problems. But with the help of trained professionals and a safe environment like that at Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches, this hurdle can be overcome, and after five

to fourteen days a patient will find themselves clean and ready to begin the next phase of their recovery.

Whatever the underlying reasons for a patient's addiction, Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches provides a customized treatment plan, with experiential therapies and counseling that will help the patient confront their inner demons.

Residential Rehab

After a patient has completed the detoxification process, the next step is for them to begin rehabilitation. For most patients, this means a residential, thirty-day program, where they stay in a supervised facility and attend therapy sessions and workshops to address the root causes of their alcoholism. Residential programs like that of Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches provide medical supervision and emotional support to patients at this vulnerable stage in their recovery, preventing them from the kind of relapse that is so common among those who attempt to kick an addiction independently or even in an outpatient program. One of the other major advantages of a residential rehab program is that it removes the patient from whatever environmental effects that may have influenced their alcoholism. By

eliminating exposure to those toxic circumstances, they can more easily focus on their recovery.

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Long-Term Residential Recovery

For patients with more severe cases of addiction, Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches offers a long-term residential program that can last from two to twelve months, and is focused on giving patients a new perspective on life. Long-term programs like this are extremely helpful for people who have spent many years grappling with addiction, as the effects of an extended chemical dependency on both a person's brain chemistry and personality are severe. Through extended behavior therapies and counseling, a patient will learn how to completely change their worldview, and eventually reach the point where they can continue on with their life.

Outpatient Recovery

When patients require a less intense level of care, they can take advantage of Behavioral Health's Intensive Outpatient Program. The therapy regimen, like with the residential programs, is individually tailored

to the needs of the patient, but is designed to allow the patient to continue functioning in their daily lives. The initial course of treatment involves three weekly meetings for a minimum of six weeks, and will continue based on patient progress and therapist recommendations. Behavioral Health's intensive program has a heightened level of care compared to more traditional outpatient programs, as many of those lack the capabilities to effectively treat patients, and thus have a higher rate of relapse.

Alcoholism, like any addiction, is a brutal disease, one that can leave you broken and hopeless, destroy your career and your relationships, and even eventually kill you.

Dual-Diagnosis Rehab

While all forms of treatment for alcoholism at Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches offer forms of therapy to deal with the depression that so frequently goes hand-in-hand with alcohol abuse, Behavioral Health also offers specialized treatment programs for dual diagnoses, particularly severe depressive disorders. Thirty-seven percent of alcohol abusers have at least one serious mental illness, the most frequent of which is depression. Treatment for dual-diagnosis addiction patients is a complex process, as the multiple disorders are frequently linked at a very primal level in the patient's mind, and it is only through extensive professional therapy that the root cause can be brought into the light and treated. This is not a process that can be done through simple outpatient therapy – only with the support of trained medical professionals like those at Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches can a patient properly address these problems and overcome them without sliding back down the slippery slope of alcoholism.

Intervention

Sometimes there are cases where an alcoholic, in the throes of addiction, refuses treatment, even with the knowledge that they may be endangering their own life or the lives of their loved ones. In those situations, there are no people better qualified to find them

help than their own family and friends. Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches will assist in setting up and implementing a professional intervention; confronting a victim of alcoholism and getting them to seek treatment is a great logistical burden and emotional hurdle, but the help of trained professionals can make all the difference. Behavioral Health will also arrange for your loved one's treatment, ensuring they are quickly placed into a recovery program.

Family-Supported Recovery Methods

Even in situations where an intervention is not necessary, in the cases where families are struggling with one family member's alcoholism, true recovery can only happen when every member of that family walks down the road to recovery together. Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches offers two programs that promote and aid in family participation in the recovery process. The first program is the weekly Family Addiction Education Support Group, where family members and significant others of current and former BHOPB patients gather to share the experiences they have had as their loved ones have gone through recovery. Families that participate in this program gain valuable knowledge and insight about what needs their loved one will have after their stay at Behavioral Health, as well as understanding about what their role will be in the post-treatment recovery process.

Behavioral Health also offers a more intense family-

involvement program; held once a month, Family Week is a five-day program where the family members of a current patient participate in intensive therapy sessions. Through this short process, they are introduced to many of the concepts that drive Behavioral Health's full recovery programs, and they will learn not only how their behavior in the past may have shaped their loved one's addiction, but also how their behavior in the future will contribute to the recovery process. More information about the specifics of the Family Week program can be found at <http://www.bhpalmbeach.com/programs/family-programs/family-program>.

Alumni Programs

After a patient has finished treatment at Behavioral Health, their recovery is by no means finished. Maintaining sobriety can be a difficult task after returning to the pressures of everyday life, and that is why Behavioral Health offers a fully-supported community for alumni of their programs, as well as for the friends and loved ones of those alumni. Through the Behavioral Health Alumni website, former patients can maintain an open dialogue about their progress and their successes, chat with other fellow alums, and organize in-person events. It can be impossible to maintain recovery alone, but with the help of the Behavioral Health alumni community, there will always be someone to talk to who is personally invested in your success.

The Road to Recovery

Alcoholism, like any addiction, is a brutal disease, one that can leave you broken and hopeless, destroy your career and your relationships, and even eventually kill you. But it is also something that, with the right help, can be overcome. Recovery is not an easy process, but the reward for all of that effort is a newfound appreciation for life. “I have a great life today,” Jerry says with a huge smile on his face. “I remember when they were telling me, ‘You need to go back to school, you need to get some more education.’ And I said, ‘I’ll be fifty years old by the time I graduate!’ And they said, ‘You’ll be fifty years old whether you graduate or not!’ And that was the beginning of my journey.” Nineteen years after almost literally crawling into a recovery program, Jerry has a career and an education and has rebuilt his relationships with his family. With the help of Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches, recovering from alcoholism is no longer an insurmountable monolith standing in the way of a functional, happy, sober life.

There is hope. We can help.

¹ http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr61/nvsr61_04.pdf

² <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/alphabets-effects-body>

³ <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/treatment-statistics>

⁴ Regier, Darrel A. et al. (1990) “Comorbidity of Mental Disorders With Alcohol and Other Drug Use.” <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=383975>

⁵ Wekesser, C. (1994), “Alcoholism.” San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc.

⁶ Akerman, Robert J. “Alcoholism and the Family.” <http://www.nacoa.org/pdfs/ackerman.pdf>



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