

## C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH – Friend or Foe

### Anonymous

*My relationship with alcohol began in my late teens when I drank a small bottle of Irish stout. Immediately I felt like 'like other people looked'. The alcohol removed all my feelings of insecurity, fear, anxiety, self doubt and replaced them with a confidence I had not previously felt. Alcohol enabled me to be more outgoing, more sociable and more confident ... to be the person that I thought I should be! Alcohol released me from my internal prison. Alcohol was my friend!*

*We lived on the other side of town to all my friends at school ... not that there were many! All the kids from my area went to a different school ... I went to the Catholic School whilst they went to the Protestant School. The only other kids who went to my school were some cousins and a couple of other boys who lived nearby. I had a feeling of not belonging and of not fitting in ... I could not stay after school for football practice or get involved in any after school activities as I had to get home. I cannot recall ever inviting any school friends to my home: it would have been too dangerous and unpredictable. Home felt like prison during my childhood.*

*My father drank a lot! He worked for a railway company and would retire to a local 'pub' to have a drink to unwind from the pressures of the day when he finished work. He was responsible for freight traffic from a nearby steel works ligbeing sent to stations and depots all over UK and always said it was a stressful job. His first wife had died after 3 years of marriage in which they had 2 children. He had to work and so his children were looked after by his mother and father in very cramped housing conditions whilst he had to live in 'lodgings'. These were psychologically tough years for him as, in addition to his bereavement, his youngest son spent over 6 months in a Children's Hospital. He met my mother after a few years and they were eventually married .... so I had 2 half brothers who were 10+ years older than me.*

*My mother, on the other hand, had a pathological aversion to alcohol. Not surprising, really, as her father was known to have had problems with alcohol which ended in him destroying a successful retail coal business. Her father and mother had also separated because of his drinking and I understand that he had been verbally, physically and psychologically violent to his wife and children. Whilst my mother had had a very*

*successful career in the Glasgow fashion scene, which took her to fashion shows in London in the 1930s, she was a wounded person who had experienced and witnessed the damage that alcohol can cause within a family.*

*My father would often stay in the pub for more than one drink and would appear home between 8 and 9pm rather inebriated: he did like his drink! Then the shouting and arguing would start between my father and mother, followed by verbal abuse and then, violent physical abuse!*

*So my childhood and formative years were lived in a state of confusion, bickering and argument that made it unsafe to bring any school friends home, or indeed, to bring any of my local friends home. I vividly remember the Friday night when my mother physically dragged my father out of the pub before he spent all his wages on drink ... there was much, screaming and fighting! Little money was left to feed the family for the rest of the week! I remember being terrified and having nightmares for months afterwards. There was no one to talk to about what was happening at home: there was no counselling!*

*In my early teenage years, I resolved that I would never drink alcohol, as I did not want my life to be like my father's, and any future wife and children would not be affected as I had been affected. However, that first feeling from alcohol was the catalyst that changed me and my life for the next 20 years. Fortunately I had little money as a student but I still managed to obtain alcohol at the weekends and always drank to excess. I could never have just one drink: there seemed little point in just one drink. One bottle, yes: one drink, no!*

*Following graduation and marriage, my drinking progressed to daily and eventually reached just over a bottle of spirits per day. My drinking was confined to the evening with Diazepam being used in the morning to combat the hangover and tremors. On reflection, I am sure that I would have not have passed a breathalyser in the morning when I went to work: I would have been over the limit. There was never any comment from my practice partners, staff or patients of my smelling of alcohol. I was 'fortunate' in not having any involvement with the GDC or the police (this was many years pre-Shipman) but did have two Service Committee hearings: I thought I could interpret the NHS Dental Regulations better than the Department of Health - such was my professional arrogance! Eventually, my partners dismissed me from the practice.*

*I became increasingly arrogant, self obsessed and self-centred at home to the point of denying my wife and children money for food, clothing and shelter. I needed money to feed my alcohol use and could not function without it. The truth was that I could not function with it, or without it. I was hooked! I was addicted – I was an alcoholic!*

*My behaviour became more erratic, making promises to my wife and children that were not fulfilled. I became verbally, physically and psychologically abusive to my wife and children whilst presenting to the world a picture of the perfect family. I became deeply involved in our church and as a Governor at our children's school. I was like a shiny apple with a rotting centre. My wife sought help to have me sectioned but I denied that there was a problem and asserted that my wife was the one with a problem! I spiralled deeper and deeper downwards! Alcohol became the centre of my life! I lived for that first drink in the evening! Alcohol was now my foe and my prison!*

*My professional life, my home life, my relationship with my wife and children were all in tatters. Financially, I was broken with the Banks pressing for repayment of the loans and mortgages and the Inland Revenue threatening to send in the bailiffs because of non payment of taxes. I knew that I had to do something ... but what? I attempted suicide in order to end everything but that was unsuccessful! I had spent 15 years building an empire – house, dental practice, cars. Now I had nothing and I had to live with that! My empire was rapidly imploding!*

*I remembered I had seen a small advert box in the British Dental Journal, inserted by The British Doctors and Dentists Group (BDDG), offering assistance to colleagues suffering with problems with alcohol or drugs. I dialled the number and left a message on an anonymous answering machine. That night I had a call from a member of BDDG. He listened to my story and shared part of his own story with me. He told me how he had a similar story to my own and how he had been helped by BDDG members to understand that he was addicted to alcohol and that addiction could be treated: it was a disease! He also told me that he was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) .... that terrified me. I agreed to meet him and to go to a BDDG meeting. That meeting changed my life and I have not had any alcohol since that meeting: that was over 25 years ago.*

*I realised that I was not the only dentist in the UK whose life was shattered by alcohol and that I was addicted to alcohol. I was encouraged to attend AA but was fearful of being seen at AA meetings. Eventually, I was hurting so much that I was glad to attend and*

*immediately found resonance with the stories from other AA members. However, although I had stopped using alcohol, my life did not fundamentally change. I was fearful, indecisive and had no focus on how to put my life in order. I was advised to study the "12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous" and use them to change my life. My brain was so scrambled that I could not really understand them and my behaviour did not change at home or work. Rehabilitation in a treatment centre for alcohol and drug dependency was the only remaining option. I spent eight weeks in primary treatment and three months in aftercare. My wife served me with divorce papers whilst I was in treatment .... that felt like the end! She also began to attend meetings of Al-Anon and of the Families Group of BDDG to assist her in her recovery from the effects and damage of my addiction.*

*Following discharge, I returned home to find that my children had scattered to friends homes for safety and my wife did not want me in the house. I spent 6 months sleeping on the floor in friends' homes in different parts of the country. Eventually, I was allowed back into the home and the really hard work of change and making amends began. I recognised that alcohol was but the symptom of a deeper underlying flawed and damaged personality. So whilst I now understood the '12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous', I needed to continue therapy with a psychotherapist over some years to enable me to understand my childhood and to find peace within myself. I also attended meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics to appreciate that my parents were also victims of the disease of alcoholism just as much as I was.*

*I had to learn that being a dentist was but the means of providing for my family: it was not an instrument with which to massage my ego! I had to learn humility! Over the years in recovery, I rebuilt my professional life and was involved in dental research, undergraduate teaching and specialist dental practice.*

*Today, I have a loving relationship with my wife (we are now 40+ years married) and with all of my children except with my son, whom I have not seen for 5 years. I live in the hope that, one day, I will be able to re-establish that relationship but that will only happen when he is willing to meet me and other members of our family. Although it hurts, I'm sure it does not hurt as much as the hurt I inflicted on him, on my wife and on our other children.*

*I have now retired from dentistry - my finances are in order and I have no debts! It has been a difficult but wonderful journey of discovery with many insights into what makes me 'tick'. It is good to be alive, one day at a time! I continue to attend meetings of BDDG and*

*AA where I have many friends all over the country. One of my treasured memories in recovery was visiting 855 Ardmore Avenue, Akron, Ohio, the birthplace of Alcoholics Anonymous ... that was a truly inspiring experience!*

*The British Doctors and Dentists Group, Alcoholics Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholics saved my life. I am one of the extremely fortunate – I was given the opportunity to recover!*

*If you think you might have a problem with alcohol or drugs, make that call to BDDG: if you are a spouse or parent of a doctor or dentist with a problem with alcohol or drugs, make that call to BDDG Families Group!*

*I look forward to welcoming you to our meetings!*