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Alcoholism is a known disease, but can be effectively treated

DR. SUSAN HOLMAN • PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 11, 2008 12:15 AM

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QUESTION: I hear people call alcoholism a disease, but I am not convinced. If a person has that much trouble handling it, then isn't it a choice they make to keep drinking?



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Dr. Susan Holman is medical director for Pavillon International, a non-profit residential center for the treatment of alcoholism and other drug addictions in Lake Lure. She is certified in addiction medicine by the American Society of Addiction Medicine. Submit your confidential and anonymous questions to Dr. Holman at info@pavillon.org. - Special to the Citizen-Times

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ANSWER: This is an excellent question to open a dialogue about alcoholism and drug addiction. The declaration that alcoholism is a disease is not new. The American Medical Association actually defined alcoholism as a disease in 1955.

Largely, society's overriding view of the alcoholic was a person who was on skid row, a person to avoid. Even today, many people view alcoholics as morally weak or simply unwilling to "change their ways." Therefore, addressing questions like yours help to remove the stereotypical opinions.

The Human Genome Project has proven that alcoholism is a genetically linked disease resulting in a deficiency of certain messenger chemicals in the brain.

Like diabetes, alcoholism is a chronic disease. And like diabetes or heart disease, alcoholism has to be treated on a daily basis. Without treatment, an alcoholic will continue to drink despite serious family, financial, health or legal problems. There is no cure. It is a lifelong disease. The good news is that treatment works and people may live very productive and satisfying lives in daily recovery.

Finally, to your last question of it being a choice. An active, or drinking alcoholic, is driven to drink by abnormal brain chemistry in the primal or old (survival) part of the brain. This is the part of the brain that, for the most part, we cannot control. The primal brain makes you breathe and makes your heart beat.

The craving an alcoholic feels for alcohol can be as strong as the need for food or water. If the individual stops drinking long enough to break the cycle of craving and use, recovery can begin.

Once an alcoholic understands that he or she has a disease and embraces the commitment to lifelong recovery, then yes, each day becomes a choice.

Regular attendance at 12 step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous has been proven to be the most effective way for the alcoholic to remain sober and lead a productive life.

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