

Beyond Addiction: Out of the shadow

by William_Moyers

For decades, she drank alone, in the dark shadow of her own shame from the consequences of blackouts, poor choices and a baffling inability to control her use of alcohol.

Not long ago, in desperation, she asked for help from an unorthodox resource: the Web site of ABC's "Good Morning America" television program. At first, she even agreed to be interviewed, as long as her identity was protected, and thus, when the cameras first rolled, she appeared only in silhouette.

But when I sat down with her this week for a follow-up interview aimed at helping her understand she is an alcoholic and deserves professional help, Diana already was determined to step out of the shadows and into the light of reality.

"The bottle was always my friend, my comfort, or so I thought," said Diana, an insurance agent from Indiana. "But I now know it isn't. This drinking life, I just can't do it anymore."

It's rare that somebody like Diana, 55, comes to the realization that she's an alcoholic without a lot of prompting from family, friends or colleagues at work. Yet Diana had none of that pressure. She is single with no children. Her friends think she's the life of the party, even though they do worry about her consumption from time to time. And as an insurance agent, she often works a lot from home or on the road.

Yet in her interviews with ABC and me, Diana answered her own perplexing questions with answers that helped her understand the essence of her problem. Diana's own words are markers others like her might use.

â€”Craving: "When I run to the store to get something to make for dinner, a lot of times I'll also end up in the aisle to get something else to drink, like maybe wine or beer or whatever I'm having an urge to drink."

â€”Attempt To Control: "If I don't have (alcohol) in the house, I won't drink it, so a lot of times, I try not to buy a lot, just enough to relax."

â€”Loss of Control: "But if I buy a big bottle of wine, I'm in trouble â€” and, you know, it just snowballs where I can't stop a lot of times. That's where I am in my life. I don't know when to quit."

â€”Consequences: "As I have gotten older, I have noticed that after a night of drinking, in the morning, besides the headache, my stomach, everything, my hands are starting to shake. And the blackouts â€” I don't remember things I've done after drinking, and it is just so dangerous."

â€”Shame: "Why is it that some people can drink a little and stop and some people can't? Why have I kept this secret? I am not proud of it â€” and I am thinking: 'I'm 55 years old. I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't have this problem. I should be in control of it, and I'm not.'"

On camera and in the bright spotlights illuminating the room, Diana and I talked about what she wanted to do and how to take those next steps to address her problem. Through her tears, she kept it simple: "I want to change. I need to make the change so I no longer feel the shame, that utter desperation, the pain that are all killing me. Yes, I am an alcoholic. I can see that now. I understand that's what I am and why I do what I do when I drink like I do."

I gave her the name of a woman at Fairbanks treatment center in Indianapolis who was ready to help her. "Only you can take that next step," I reminded Diana before I flew back to the Twin Cities. "Recovery is your responsibility."

Two hours later, I had a message from the treatment center. Diana already had called.

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