

## April is Alcohol Awareness Month

By G. Raymond McCullough

April is Alcohol Awareness month. What exactly does that mean? Whose awareness are we trying to raise and specifically about what? I guess it depends on who you ask? Let me caution you this article will probably create more questions than answers

Let's start with something we can all agree on. Alcohol Awareness Month has been sponsored by the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) since 1987 and it encourages local communities to focus on alcoholism and alcohol-related issues.

Thus the intent, as the name implies, is to raise the general public's awareness about the potential and harmful impact of alcohol use. This is especially true for those that use alcohol in a way that has had or has the potential to have a negative impact. The negative impact is usually reflected in a person experiencing social, psychological, emotional, physical, and occupational problems. In addition there are the enormous monetary costs to the community at large. As mentioned earlier, the harmful impact of alcohol use is commonly and clinically associated with alcohol abuse and in more serious cases alcoholism. We may not find agreement on this point. However, you are likely to be aware when someone you care about crosses the line between the appropriate use of alcohol and abuse (when it has harmful implications for ourselves, our loved ones, our community). Typically, it doesn't take a consultation with a counselor to tell us when alcohol use has become a problem. In my 25 years as a drug and alcohol counselor, conducting thousands of drug and alcohol assessments, I've always had the sense (in the vast majority of the cases) when I shared my clinical impression with the client that I was merely confirming what the client already suspected.

Before we go any further let me share with you what The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services would like you to know:

When many people think of alcohol abusers, they picture teenagers sneaking drinks before high school football games or at unsupervised parties. However, alcohol abuse is prevalent within many demographic groups in the United States. People who abuse alcohol can be:

- College students who binge drink at local bars.
- Pregnant women who drink and put their babies at risk for fetal alcohol syndrome.
- Professionals who drink after a long day of work.
- Senior citizens who drink out of loneliness.

In 2007, more than one fifth (23.3 percent) of persons aged 12 or older participated in binge drinking at least once in the 30 days prior to taking SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). This translates to about 57.8 million people. The rate in 2007 is similar to the rate in 2006 (23.0 percent).

### Warning Signs of Alcohol Abuse

If you answer "yes" to any of the following questions, you may have a problem with alcohol:

- Do you drink alone when you feel angry or sad?
- Does your drinking ever make you late for work?
- Does your drinking worry your family?
- Do you ever drink after telling yourself you won't?
- Do you ever forget what you did while drinking?
- Do you get headaches or have a hangover after drinking?

The rates of alcoholism and substance abuse are not the same across ethnic groups in the US. African-Americans and Native Americans have the highest incidence substance abuse problems, with the latter having the highest. This fact prompts me to ponder what do these 2 ethnic groups have in common that may contribute to higher rates of alcohol and other drug abuse. I have a hypothesis but that is for another time and another discussion.

Now in the spirit of Alcohol Awareness Month here are some more facts:

Forty-four percent of the adult U.S. population (aged 18 and over) are current drinkers who have consumed at least 12 drinks in the preceding year (Dawson et al. 1995). Although most people who drink do so safely, the minority who consume alcohol heavily produce an impact that ripples outward to encompass their families, friends, and communities. The following statistics give a glimpse of the magnitude of problem drinking:

- Approximately 14 million Americans— 7.4 percent of the population —meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse or alcoholism (Gran et al. 1994).
- More than one-half of American adults have a close family member who has or has had alcoholism ( Dawson and Grant 1998).
- Approximately one in four children younger than 18 years old in the United States is exposed to alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence in the family (Grant 2000).

Alcohol consumption has consequences for the health and well - being of those who drink and, by extension, the lives of those around them.

Now that you have some statistical information, let me continue by sharing some of my personal insights and perspectives. I believe any effort to heighten your awareness and that of the community you live in-- with the goal of reducing the negative impact of alcohol use--you have to ask yourself some hard questions. I want to do that by asking you, the reader, to respond to the following:

1. Why is it that major segments of American society have this insatiable appetite for alcohol and other substances of abuse?
2. The previous question infers that the spirit of our communities may be broken. If this is true what should we be doing to heal our spirit?

3. Have we become a society of victims who are inclined to shirk personal responsibility, for ourselves, our children, our families?
4. As individuals and as a community are we modeling the behavior—to include public policy-- that will build healthy families and communities?
5. Have we become so distracted that we have lost our sensitivity and empathy as an important part of dealing with our family and community needs?
6. Are we asking alcohol and drug treatment providers to deliver on something they are incapable or are not equipped to deliver on...are our expectations realistic?

I suspect, these are tough questions that seem to have no easy answers. You may have concluded that I have answered these questions for myself with the mere presenting of them. The response to both is yes. However, one person alone cannot effect the changes or responses that are needed. It will take the collective awareness and commitment of a community to answer and then act on the responses to these questions.

Finally, I want to re-iterate if we are to be successful in reducing the negative impact of alcohol use in our communities we must act on our new and evolving awareness—change does not occur through insight and awareness alone it requires action. As a community we must commit ourselves to move past pettiness, competing interests, and sarcasm (in bedded in our beliefs) that inhibits our ability to deal with the roots of alcohol and other drug abuse.

*The author of this article is a descendant of the Ashanti people of western Africa and the Muskogee Tribe whose original ancestral lands were in the southeastern region of the U.S.*