

Too Much Time in a Bottle

How do you deal with a dad who chooses to spend his last years in an alcoholic haze?

by Terry D. Hargrave, Ph.D.

Kim's Story My older brother and I have known for years about Dad's drinking problem. After Mom died suddenly from a stroke 18 months ago, e noticed that he was intoxicated more often than not. My brother lives far away and I've been busy with my kids. I'd have to say that since Mom died, Dad, who's 73, has been mostly on his own.

Now I realize that his drinking is getting out of control. Three weeks ago, he ran his car into a garage wall. He's always had high blood pressure, which I believe is aggravated by drinking, but now he has cirrhosis of the liver. And he has frequent memory lapses, which I'm sure are related to alcohol.

I wish it were as simple as telling him to quit. But Dad, who was a successful stockbroker, has always been the guy who told everyone else what to do. You can't make him do anything. He certainly doesn't listen to me about the drinking. I know he's been depressed since Mom's death, but I can no longer ignore the situation. If he doesn't stop drinking, he is going to kill himself or someone else.

Harmon's Story I really don't see what Kim is all upset about. I have never denied that I drink. I've been drinking the same amount for 20 years. Sure, I'm having more trouble with my health, but so what? We all have to go sometime. As for my wife, my grief is my own business. I have always lived life on my own terms and it's going to stay that way. I love my kids, but they have their own lives to lead and their own families to look after. I just want Kim to leave me be and stop making a fuss over me.

Dr. Hargrave's Response Alcoholism in the older population is a very hard subject to address because many excuse elder drinking habits with statements like "they are not hurting anyone" or "they have earned the right to five however they wish in the time they have left." The fact is, however, that many older people have problems with alcohol. The condition has devastating physical effects on the individual and longlasting emotional effects on the family.

Most people like Harmon have been drinking for much of their lives. However, with age, the dramatic effects of alcohol cannot be exaggerated. Older people tend to weigh less, so they become intoxicated sooner. Blood flow decreases, and this in turn makes older drinkers more prone to liver complications. Most important, the aging brain is altered more dramatically by alcohol. The result is impaired judgment even more so than in a young

person and over time, impaired memory. Harmon came to see me with Kim only because she repeatedly insisted. He was downright hostile in my office, glowering as he spoke: "I have never thought much of counselors. No offense."

"Fair enough," I said. "It takes a kindhearted father who cares about his daughter to see someone he doesn't respect."

Harmon laughed. "Yes, it's true, my daughter has always made her mother and me prouder brother did, too, though she's been the one who has kept up with me more since my wife, Jean, passed away. "

Kim chimed in. "I haven't done enough," she said. "I was so close to my mother and was overwhelmed after she died. I think I buried myself in my own family to deal with my grief. But now I realize how much I love and need Dad, even though we weren't so close. He's the only one I have left and I want him to stay in my life."

Harmon seemed surprised and touched by his daughter's words. Nevertheless, he maintained his defensive posture: "I drink like I always have and don't intend to stop."

Sometimes reason is the only way around an impasse. "Look," I said, "in your business, if several stock analysts advised selling a certain stock and you disagreed, what would you do?"

"I would learn the facts, but in the end I'd go with what I thought best," he said.

"So that's what I'm asking you to do here," I said. "You have an important person saying you have a problem. You say you don't. Just check out the facts and then do what you think is best." After some discussion, Harmon agreed to do some reading on alcoholism and take a self-test at the local Area Council on Alcoholism.

In our next session, Harmon reported back: "I show all the signs of alcoholism and many of my physical problems are related to my drinking. I drink about the same amount as always, four to eight drinks a day Scotch. I probably am an alcoholic. But I feel that I have lived my life on my own terms and don't care to change, no matter what."

"Even if that takes you away from your family sooner or makes you sick so they have to take care of you?" I asked.

"If that's what it means, then it's going to have to be that way," he said.

Harmon's reaction was not uncommon among older alcoholics. I gave my parting advice: "I understand that you have been drinking for a long time, but your choice to continue now also has a lot to do with your grief over losing your wife and not wanting to be alone." Harmon was silent.

At this point, what seemed best was to work with Kim to help her handle the stress. She learned how to set the boundaries needed to stay connected with Harmon but not subject

herself or her family to him when he was intoxicated. She stopped making excuses for him or feeling responsible for his behavior. She learned how to deal with her anger and not attack him with guilt or manipulation. She and her brother both joined AlAnon (for more information, see left).

Harmon's condition followed the course of many older alcoholics and worsened over the next year and a half. He continued to drive and was arrested and convicted of driving under the influence after a minor accident. Kim and her brother approached him again, and this time he agreed to seek treatment. Sadly, however, two months later he died from cirrhosis. After her father's death, Kim wrote, "We did the work we needed to do to be able to love Dad as an alcoholic, but it is so sad that we didn't get the chance to love him unimpaired in his final years."

Teny Hargrave, Ph.D., teaches counseling at West Texas A&M University His latest book is Forgive the Devil: Coming to Terms With Damaged Relationships (Zeig, Tucker & Theisen).

Here's to Your Health

Chronic alcoholism is a serious problem anytime, but can have exaggerated effects on people as they age. What you need to know:

Older drinkers can change

Research has shown that older alcoholics have the best chance of quitting drinking for good. Once they start treatment they seldom drop out.

Medications make things worse

Alcohol is a powerful drug, which, at best, can neutralize the effects of needed prescribed medication. At worst, it can combine with prescription drugs to produce harmful or deadly effects. Seek a physician's advice if you take medication and drink, or if someone is drinking while on medication.

What you can't do

Exhaustive research shows that you simply can't force an alcoholic to quit. It is also not helpful to attempt to nag, confront, ignore, or shame someone into reforming.

What you can do

Acknowledge the problem. Talk about it. Express your honest feelings to the problem drinker. Be available to help if he or she is willing. It is hard work to find

a way to love a family member without at the same time facilitating his or her drinking. For help, contact XAnon, which provides support for family

and friends of alcoholics. Contact 8884ALANON (425-2666) MF, 86 P.m.
ET for meeting information; www.alanon.alateen.org.