ATTITUDE TOWARD ALCOHOLICS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The objective of this work was to find out whether alcoholics undergoing therapy are considered rightful members of society. We also examined the attitudes of society toward the alcoholic’s family. Alcoholism is a specific disorder. Alcohol-addicted persons deny their illness and often engage their closest surrounding in the denial system. They also find in the society a specific margin of consent to drink. Research shows that treated alcoholics believe the society has a low level of knowledge concerning alcohol addiction. They fear the perspective of going back to work or finding a new job after finishing therapy. Studies done among the inhabitants of the mountainous Podhale Region in Poland show that a high percentage of people are convinced that one should be ashamed of being an alcoholic and many would feel awkward in the presence of a sober alcoholic. The people declare that they would not trust a person being treated because of the addiction and name professions that alcoholics should not work in. The spouse of an alcoholic is often blamed for the addiction, and children of alcoholics are perceived as people with worse life perspectives than their peers.

Key words: addiction, alcoholism, family, society attitude

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of alcoholism has been known for ages and it has been defined as an individual problem with behavior. A person suffering from this disease drinks too much and cannot stop drinking. Currently, alcoholism is treated as a primary disease, which requires direct treatment. An alcoholic does not know he is addicted, or he denies he knows that. But it is not only the
drinking person who denies that. Otherwise alcoholics would soon become isolated and would experience fear and anxiety. Alcoholic’s behaviors are rarely timely rejected and often it does not happen at all. People close to an alcoholic start to think similarly.

An alcoholic family is generally described as a family where chaos and inconsequence are present, its behaviors are unpredictable. The roles are divided in such a family in an unclear way. Bans are arbitrary and not stable. There are arguments, thinking full of repeats, lack of logics, and sometimes there also is violence and incest (1, 2, 5, 9, 10). It is difficult or even impossible to protect a child brought up in alcoholic family from experiencing significant or dramatic damage in the emotional sphere (1, 6). The spouse of a person addicted to alcohol, similarly to their children, starts to show features described as codependence (8). “Codependence” (“coalcoholism” previously) means a passive attitude of another person to alcoholic’s dominancy. A codependent person gives up initiative, accepts a non-realistic view of reality, turns toward the alcoholic and organizes his own life around drinking episodes just like the alcoholic does (1). People who experience codependence present a specific configuration of their personality characteristics.

The following types of people are predisposed to codependence:
- martyr – life makes sense when, and only then, one is important and loved, when he is suffering;
- fawner – has the right to exist under the condition that nobody is angry at him;
- eternal carer – not only takes care of others, but also makes people dependent on him;
- workoholic - builds entire self-esteem only on his work;
- perfectionist – aiming at perfection in everything;
- butterfly – free bird – a person who never commits himself to doing anything for other people (9).

Alcohol becomes a problem of the whole family, but nobody wants to name it openly and everyone tries to hide it from the society. Despite the family effort aiming to hide alcohol problems, the social environment usually knows about it (6). Living in a group of people it is very easy to make an outcast from an innocent man, to name him a deviant, degenerate, ruthless psychopath who has no human feelings. As a matter fact, it is not important what kind of accusation is put on a scapegoat. A coincidence or sometimes a conscious manipulation decides about that.

Tolerance can be disrupted by economic, political, and social crisis when many important demands stay unsatisfied. It is easy to find so called scapegoats, i.e., distinctive people who are not liked and are helpless, and who are held responsible for the whole evil. Attacks against those people make it possible to lower the stress level, but that does not solve the real problems (4).
The following psychological features are believed to be conducive to become a victim:
– masochistic penchant;
– discouragement toward life (spleen);
– Abel syndrome – concerns people who have a deep sense of guilt because of their success and continuously try to balance injustice of the world (7).

Social climate in which a scapegoat is found is permeated with uncertainty, sense of threat, deepening antagonisms between people and danger to the self-image.

The following elements are considered as victim’s features:
– visibility – a person distinguishes from the environment;
– accessibility;
– weakness and no revenge possibility
– historically fixed antagonisms between groups of people (justification developed by previous generation and traditions) (7).

Expressions like „alcoholic”, „alcoholic’s child” and „alcoholic’s spouse” are sometimes used as labels. These labels lead to a situation when not only family members but also people from the surroundings see the label and not the human being. Labeling is understood as a process of attributing negative features to a person in order to lower his value. Stigmatization humiliates, demeans, offends, and causes or deepens criticism and jeer at behaviors. Individual’s or group’s stigmatization usually takes place in the situation when attacked people have no possibility to show their objection, defend themselves, or counterattack. A verbal assault is usually loud, but the possible rehabilitation happens mostly imperceptibly to the public opinion. Stigmatization is conducive to anarchy in social life, for it leads to the growth of hostility and tensions in relations between groups. It mocks authorities and increases the probability of conflicts between people and it also makes cooperation difficult (3).

The main objective of this work was to assess, as based on survey questionnaires, the attitude of society toward people addicted to alcohol and to their families. Particularly, we sought to determine whether alcoholics undergoing therapy are considered the rightful members of society and whether society shows negative attitudes toward sober alcoholics, their spouses and children.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

All participants of the study were informed about its objective, the anonymity, and the way of utilization of information gathered. All subjects gave informed consent to study procedures. The study was approved by a local ethics Committee.

The study was conducted in 2 groups: treated alcoholics and healthy persons, all living in the Podhale Region in southern Poland. The study took 2 months from February to March 2006. The group of sober alcoholics consisted of 42 people, 10 women (24%) and 32 men (74%). The mean
The period of alcohol addiction was 9 ±6 years, on average, and therapeutic attempts were made mainly for the preceding 3 years. The healthy group of controls, representative for the society, comprised 97 individuals, 60 women (62%) and 37 men (38%) of the mean age of 37 ±14 years.

The alcoholics enrolled into the study came from the following medical institutions:
- Disaccustoming unit of the John Paul II Hospital in Nowy Targ;
- Detoxication unit of the John Paul II Hospital in Nowy Targ;
- Disaccustoming outpatient clinic in Nowy Targ;
- Disaccustoming outpatient clinic in Limanowa;

Two survey questionnaires were used in the study. One, designed for sober alcoholics, consisted of 18 closed questions. The other comprised 36 closed and open questions and was designed for the healthy controls. This second survey’s objective was to assess the attitude of society toward people addicted to alcohol.

Detailed assumptions of this study can be formulated as follows:
1. Are alcoholics convinced of negative attitudes of society toward them?
2. Does the society believe that alcoholics are a worse kind of people?
3. Are alcoholics’ spouses considered by the society to be worse than other people?
4. Are children of alcoholics considered to be as good as their peers?

RESULTS

Feelings of sober alcoholics

Majority of sober alcoholics (46%) felt accepted by the society despite their disease. However, every third person (36%) felt unaccepted (Fig.1).

The vast majority of sober alcoholics (69%) felt understood by people from their closest surroundings, but 28% of the participants felt not being understood (Fig. 2). Only every third participant (32%) was convinced that people had sufficient knowledge about alcohol addiction. However, majority of sober alcoholics (63%) was sure that the society did not have that kind of knowledge (Fig. 3). Most sober alcoholics participating in the study (73%) did not feel rejected by their family because of the therapy. However, 12% felt rejected by the family in one way or other (Fig. 4).
According to the majority of sober participants (76%) they did not feel rejected by their acquaintances because of treatment. However, every fifth participant (19%) experienced sense of rejection as far as people they knew were concerned (Fig. 5). Working alcoholic respondents (64%) stated they did not feel rejected by co-workers because of treatment. However, 11% of the respondents felt rejected in one or another way by the people working with them (Fig. 6).

Attitudes presented by the society studied

Most of the society studied (76%) believed a person treated because of alcohol addiction is as worthy of respect as any other person. Only 10% of the
respondents thought that people participating in addiction therapy should not rather be respected as other people (Fig. 7).

Half of the participants (50%) believed that one could not trust treated alcoholic in the same way as people who never had problems with alcohol. Only every third person (33%) from the studied society would trust an alcoholic participating in the therapy in the same way they would trust those who had no alcohol addiction (Fig. 8). Most people (90%) think that the alcoholic’s spouse is as valuable person as other people (Fig. 9).

Almost half of the participants (45%) believed that the company of alcoholics’ children would not have a bad influence on other kids. However, every third

![Fig. 5. Sense of rejection by acqua-intances because of addiction treatment.](image1)

![Fig. 6. Sense of rejection by co-workers because of addiction treatment.](image2)

![Fig. 7. Is a person participating in addiction therapy as worthy of respect as other people?](image3)
respondent (33%) said that the alcoholics’ children could have such unfavourable impact on others (Fig. 10). Almost all participants of this study (93%) believed that the child of alcoholics can be as valuable a person as his peers (Fig. 11). It was also found that the major part of the studied society (94%) is convinced that alcoholics’ children should have as good opportunities to learn prestigious professions and jobs at socially valuable positions as their peers (Fig. 12).

Most participants (74%) said that alcoholics’ children had worse life perspectives than their peers. Only every fifth person (17%) was convinced that those children did not have worse life perspectives (Fig. 13). Almost half of the
Fig 11. Is the alcoholic’s child as valuable a person as his peers?

Fig 12. Should alcoholics’ children have an opportunity to get prestigious professions and jobs?

Fig 13. Do alcoholics’ children have worse life perspectives than their peers?

Fig 14. Do children of alcoholics have a congenital propensity to social pathology?
studied society (46%) believed that children of alcoholics had a congenital susceptibility to social pathology and only 28% had opposite opinion (Fig. 14). Most of the respondents (65%) believed that the life situation of an alcoholics’ child had a negative impact on the child’s personality. 17% presented opposite opinion (Fig. 15). Most of the studied population (69%) did not think that children of alcoholics were less intelligent than their peers (Fig. 16).

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The majority of sober alcoholics feel accepted by their surroundings despite the fact of their disease. They feel understood by their closest society. They have no sense of rejection by their families, friends and co-workers as far as their treatment is concerned. However, the vast majority of them are convinced that the society has no sufficient information about alcohol abuse.

The majority of society believes that the person, treated because of alcohol addiction, is as worthy of respect as any other individual. However, half of the respondents think that one cannot trust alcoholics, who are under treatment; in the same way one could trust those who never had an alcohol abuse problem.

Most of the respondents say that the spouse of an alcoholic is as worthy a person as any other people. Almost half of the participants of this study believe
that the company of alcoholics’ children rather has no bad influence on other children. Most of our respondents do not think that children of alcoholics are less intelligent than their peers. Almost all of the participants are convinced that a child of alcoholics can be as valuable a person as their peers and that those children should have the same opportunities to learn and get prestigious professions and jobs at socially highly valued positions. However, many respondents see that children of alcoholics have worse life perspectives. Almost half of the society studied is convinced that alcoholics’ children have a congenital susceptibility to social pathology, and most of the respondents have a feeling that the life situation of those children may have a negative impact on the personality of an alcoholic’s child.

REFERENCES


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