



Raising the glass

The question of using alcohol to **excess**

by Bradley T. Wajda, D.O.

Alcohol abuse gets a lot of attention, and rightly so. The statistics are staggering:

- *62% of men drank in the last 30 days*
- *17% of men will become dependent on alcohol*
- *5.3 million women in the United States drink enough to endanger their health and safety*
- *8% of women will become alcohol dependent*
- *37% of 9th grade girls drank in the last month*
- *64% of full-time college students drank in the last month (44% binge drink)*
- *80 is the average number of times a person will drive while under the influence before getting a DUI*
- *One in three people will be involved in an alcohol-related accident within their lifetime*

These are just a few of the statistics available from numerous reputable web sites including Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Centers for Disease Control, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism...and the stats keep going. Each statistic is impressive, but when taken as a whole, the numbers are mind-numbing. It's commonplace to joke about alcohol, drinking and driving, and getting drunk. There are so many euphemisms for alcohol and alcohol intoxication. Here are a few of the ones I think are designed to reframe drinking into something more socially acceptable:

- *making merry* • *shining* • *drinking spirits* • *feeling mellow* • *going to happy hour*
- *feeling toasty* • *partying* • *getting tipsy*

My experience over 25 years has shown me that most people who have at-risk drinking habits are oblivious to the reality of their alcohol abuse. Many people don't hesitate to label the abusive use of alcohol as "social drinking" because they believe it is just that – benign social drinking.

More facts about alcohol:

- "Heavy" or binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks at one sitting at least one time per week. That's it.
- No more than one drink per day for women or two drinks per day for men is labeled as social use.
- A drink is defined as one 12 ounce beer or 5 ounces of wine or one shot of liquor (1.5 ounces).
- More than 50% of all alcohol consumed by adults is done during binge drinking.
- More than 90% of all alcohol consumed by youths is done during binge drinking.

The definitions of alcohol abuse and dependence are well established and I have summarized the criteria for each.

Alcohol abuse is the continued use of alcohol resulting in:

- failure to fulfill major obligations at work, school, or in the home.
- legal problems.
- social or interpersonal problems.
- using alcohol in situations in which it is hazardous to do so (like driving).

Alcohol dependence is characterized by:

- needing increasing amounts of alcohol to achieve intoxication or desired effect.
- drinking to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- the inability to cut down or control drinking.
- important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of drinking.
- continued drinking despite knowing of a physical or psychological problem that is likely to be caused or exacerbated by drinking.

Whether it's a holiday, birthday, wedding, graduation, or just the weekend, there is never a shortage of social events where alcohol is served. These events often mask the severity of a drinking problem because they provide a reason or "excuse" for the drinking. It's important that you be honest with yourself about your drinking habits. If you are afraid to ask your spouse or other family member their opinion, then you likely have your answer already. There are numerous orga-



nizations and programs available to meet your specific comfort level in addressing problematic alcohol use. When alcohol abuse or dependence is present, I strongly recommend that you receive a medical evaluation to ensure that you are not suffering from one of the many physical problems that can be caused by alcohol abuse.

One simple test to screen for problem drinking is the "CAGE," standing for "cut down, annoyed, guilty, eye-opener," and is as follows:

- 1 *Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?*
- 2 *Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?*
- 3 *Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?*
- 4 *Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?*

A CAGE score of two or more means that you need to talk to a professional to be evaluated for problem drinking.

During his 25 years practicing in the Central Valley, Dr. Bradley T. Wajda has amassed extensive experience in adult and child psychiatry, as well as comprehensive substance abuse treatment. His Fresno practice, Esano Health, represents his most recent endeavor to enhance the scope of mental health services available to the general public through a range of treatment options that are personalized to the needs of each individual.