

ALCOHOLISM AND ITS REHABILITATION PROGRAMME IN INDUSTRY

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Alcoholism is a progressive illness with a high rate of incidence among industrial workers. It is a primary cause for other problems like absenteeism, poor performance, accident proneness and low productivity. Some industrial organisations have assumed a role of social responsibility towards rehabilitating their alcoholic employees, which has turned out to be mutually beneficial. The major features of rehabilitating are programmes for individual and group counselling and for family counselling.

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Alcoholism in a Broad Perspective

The recent upsurge of alcoholism in our population is causing serious concern to governments and industries. The World Health Organisation has pronounced alcoholism as a third major killer of mankind after heart-attacks and cancer. So grave is this problem, that alcohol is associated with a sizeable percentage of deaths caused by accidents, murders, and suicides. It also takes its toll of human suffering by way of broken marriages, broken homes and heavy financial loss to industry and economy.

There are diverse views and opinions held by researchers about alcoholism, but, as yet, the precise nature of the causes of alcoholism has not been identified. There are views which attribute alcoholism to a 'chemical allergy' or, in other words, consider an alcoholic to be a victim of physiopathology. Others talk about an 'alcoholic personality' or hold the view that an individual is psychologically vulnerable to alcohol. His excessive drinking is a means of coping with life's stresses and strains.

Whatever the causes of alcoholism, studies have concurred that alcoholism is an illness, and as such, a progressive illness. The intensive studies done on about 2,000 admitted alcoholics by the late E. M. Jellinek reveal that there are roughly four phases of alcoholism. In the first phase, or the 'pre alcoholic' phase, the potential alcoholic drinks to relieve tensions. Whereas other people in society may use better means to resolve their tensions, this particular individual reacts to alcohol, and indulges in relief drinking. In the second phase, 'relief drinking' may be resorted to oftener. He may also drink in secret and think about alcohol much of the time. His guilt regarding his alcohol would increase markedly. In this stage, he may often experience 'black-outs', a condition where the individual has no recollection of his actions after the drinking spell. Alcohol has already begun to affect his physical and mental health. In the third or the 'acute' phase, the individual begins to lose control over his drinks. There is a 'craving' for drinks at particular times. At this stage of his drinking career, the individual rationalizes his behaviour and projects his excesses on to others. His life has already become chaotic and disorganised. In the fourth or the 'chronic' phase, the individual has no more pretenses about his drinking. He has already resorted to morning drinking. He is inebriated throughout the day or days together. This phase answers our stereotyped image of an alcoholic, with a shaggy beard, tattered clothes,

bleary eyes and a wayward walk. At this stage, he has probably lost his job and has reached a stage of total demoralization and degradation. It may happen that not all alcoholics pass through these phases. There have been cases of 'instant' alcoholics. However, knowledge of these phases improves our understanding of the progressive aspects of this illness, for the detection of its early symptoms and its subsequent treatment.

Alcoholism in Industry

A Management problem: Although alcoholism is an age-old problem in industry, the concept of it has undergone a lot of change lately. It is estimated that industry has 2 to 4 per cent of persons who are alcoholics on its pay-rolls. This is a staggering figure. Alcoholism is also noticed to be a primary cause in a variety of industrial malaise which comes out in the garb of absenteeism, poor performance, lower productivity, accident proneness on the job and lowered morale. In the mid-fifties in the U.S.A., the loss to industry due to alcoholism was referred to as a 'billion dollar hangover'. Today, an accurate estimate of this loss is \$15 billion. If left untackled, alcoholism could shake an industry to its very root. As such, it has become a management problem and needs an approach which can deal with it, with urgency and efficiency.

Changing Attitudes towards Alcoholics

With the increasing realization that alcoholism is an illness, and not a moral problem as was thought earlier, employers are realizing their special role and responsibility towards alcoholics. Whereas, the traditional approach has been either to dismiss the detected alcoholic or tolerate him indefinitely, professional and forward looking managements, today, are emphasizing the rehabilitation of the suffering alcoholics on the job itself.

This approach has an element of wisdom. It serves a number of purposes. Management hires an employee with a view to establish a long term contract. It invests, in an employee by way of money, time and training. A dismissal of an alcoholic involves considerable personnel costs, as once again the procedure of recruitment and training goes on for a new recruit. However, there is no guarantee that the newcomer may not have the same problem of alcoholism or develop it later.

Secondly, the rehabilitation of the alcoholic without dismissal, saves the society of an additional burden of unemployment. The rehabilitation programme can be a mutually benefiting experience to management and its employees. The employees would appreciate the managements' approach of maintaining the dignity of the individual and his job. This would go a long way in enhancing the employer-employee relationship.

Some Important Factors to Remember While Helping Alcoholics

Before starting a programme of rehabilitation, a company has to acknowledge certain facts about alcoholism:

- i) Alcoholism is an illness, not a moral problem.
- ii) Alcoholism can be treated and, as such is worth treating.
- iii) A change of attitude on the part of management, staff and fellow-workers, towards the suffering alcoholic, is a necessity.

The non-alcoholic world looks upon an alcoholic as a good-for-nothing-person. Some people in the company may take a paternalistic attitude and shield an alcoholic employee, fearing that he may be dismissed if notified. Others are critical. Their accusations are often expressed in ways such as, "If I can hold my drink why can't he?", "Serves him right he asked for it". Often from this quarter, management may be blamed for 'mollycoddling' alcoholics and the recovery programme would be viewed with cynicism.

In essence, what is required is viewing alcoholism in its proper perspective. It calls for a high level of tolerance and empathy on the part of its practitioners. Initially, the alcoholic employee would try to exploit this concern of the employer to his advantage, which has to be dealt with firmness.

Significance of Work as Therapy in a Recovery Programme

The significance of having an in-factory rehabilitation programme of alcoholism contributes greatly to the recovery of workers suffering from this illness. Though the family, church, and welfare agencies have also contributed in the recovery of alcoholics the contribution of the work organisation is unique. A job is not only a source of economic strength but also an emotional satisfaction to an individual. A dismissal from the job would mean a double loss of face to an individual, who is already carrying a stigma of alcoholism. A job carries with it an authority which is binding on the employee and makes him face facts, or else....

A recovery programme in a factory could be started on a very small scale and without much fanfare. An alcoholic is very sensitive about his addiction. He would go to any extent to deny this habit even to the point of telling blatant lies. In a factory, an alcoholic is also a target of jokes and ridicule of his colleagues and friends. He is painfully aware of this. Hence, any showy publicity, while starting a programme, would bring him unnecessarily into the spotlight. Attending the programme would itself be an open confession of his alcoholism. Hence, he might avoid this.

Programme of Rehabilitation, its Nature and Content

The programme of rehabilitation, in an industry, would generally come under the auspices of the Personnel Department. A well-rounded recovery programme has four important aspects:

- i) An individual approach or 'counselling' to the individual alcoholic.
- ii) A 'group' approach or a meeting of alcoholics to be held once a week, or more frequently,
- iii) Educating the rest of the working population regarding alcoholism,
- iv) Counselling the family.

In the individual approach, the identification of an individual alcoholic is essential. Chronic absence coupled with poor job performance, is an indication of a problem with alcohol. This could be reaffirmed by his officers or supervisors. The individual then could be motivated to participate in his own recovery. He needs to be educated regarding the disease aspects of alcohol. He would be given insights into his behaviour. A 'tough' alcoholic could be confronted with data as regards his poor attendance, his poor quality of work, all results of his alcoholism. He will blame his

poor attendance on external factors but rarely his drinks. (If the reasons given by an alcoholic for his absence are compared with the reasons for absence of the non-alcoholic employees, one will be amazed at the number of 'deaths' in the families of alcoholics. Often by oversight, the same member would have died twice.) The threat of losing a job could act as 'constructive coercion' to motivate him to change his behaviour.

Individual counselling *per se* may not be enough. It has to be sustained by a 'group' approach. Meetings of the spotted alcoholics could be conducted inside the factory premises. These meetings could be organised on the basis of the approach of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). A factory may have recovered alcoholics who are members of the AA. These members can be instrumental in forming a group within the factory. If there are no such recovered alcoholics, AA members from outside could be invited to conduct meetings, till such time that the factory has some of its own recoveries.

For meetings, a company has to allot a certain fixed time during the factory hours and a convenient place to hold the meetings. Taking the three shifts into consideration, the meetings could be held at a time when maximum participation is possible.

The group approach gives the individual alcoholic the support and strength of numbers. He gets acceptance and companionship in the supportive climate of the group. In the group meeting, the recovered members 'share' with the group their experiences with alcohol, the 'beating' they got in their lives due to it, and their wonderful recovery by 'keeping away from that first drink'. This sharing is the guiding force to the suffering alcoholic. Somehow, he has come to a stage today, when he has admitted defeat as far as alcohol is concerned. He is desperately in need of help and a better life, and AA is a godsend at such times. There is an immediate 'identification' with the recovered alcoholic and a feeling "if he can make it why can't I". And so begins the recovery programme for him.

No programme is successful unless the co-operation of others in the factory is forthcoming. The involvement of the union, officers, supervisors and fellow-workers is very significant. It is necessary to inform these people about alcoholism and how it could be arrested. Informative literature on alcoholism could be circulated amongst them to modify stereotyped attitudes and misconception about alcoholics. Non-alcoholic employees may be invited to attend the meetings. Anonymity is an important AA tradition and has served its purpose well. However, the factory reality is different. Here employees are known to each other, especially alcoholic employees, who are noted for their habit. Again if the meetings are kept closed, an aura of secrecy prevails, exciting the curiosity of non-alcoholic employees. The chances are that an alcoholic who attends the meeting would be unnecessarily ragged on the shop-floor. Group meetings, in a way, serve a double purpose; to the alcoholic the meetings are a sort of therapy and the non-alcoholic gets an educative experience.

Role of a Social Worker Counsellor in the Programme

In companies, big or small, where the rehabilitation programme for alcoholics exists, the services of a Social Worker or a Counsellor are indispensable. Often a recovery programme of alcoholism could be conceived and executed in this department. With

her knowledge and skills, a counsellor is capable of assessing a wide variety of human problems. To make the programme viable, she has to serve as a link between the individual alcoholic, his family members and the working milieu.

Often the families of alcoholics are in need of some orientation regarding the recovery programme. It is noticed that owing to the fear of a possible termination from the job, the family members often deny the existence of an alcoholic problem in the employee.

This gives the alcoholic a further chance to take advantage of the situation. While working with the family members, specially the wife, the counsellor can allay her fears about the termination of job, orient her about alcoholism and encourage her to attend AA meetings held outside. There are also meetings of Alanon and Alateen (which are offshoots of AA) conducted in different parts of Bombay, especially for the spouses and children of alcoholics.

It is essential to acquaint the supervisors and chargehands with the stages of alcoholism. The shop-floor personnel are in a position to contribute to the identification of alcoholics; early detection of such cases would save a great deal of untold misery.

A counsellor has to take individual needs and differences of alcoholics into consideration. Some alcoholics respond to motivational and confrontational methods, others 'click' at their first group meeting. However, alcoholics in the acute phase, may require detoxification and drug therapy. They may have withdrawal symptoms or convulsions in this phase and hospitalisation is advisable. They may be persuaded later to join the recovery programme.

It takes time to develop a recovery programme in an industry. Often, quick results are expected. Frustration is very often experienced when an alcoholic takes his time to be "on the wagon" or when he "slips" after remaining dry for a while. At one stage, it may appear that the programme has bleak prospects. But with persistence and tenacity on the part of the practitioners, this phase also passes and the programme gathers strength.