

“You Need to Stop Drinking”

Category: Turning Over a New Leaf

written by Linda Lundeen | January 31, 2020

Early in my family medicine residency, I admitted a woman to the hospital for complications of alcoholism. She was young. She didn't look like a chronic alcoholic. She continued to work. Even her fingernails were polished. Yet she had alcoholic pancreatitis. She was in severe abdominal pain and was vomiting uncontrollably. As the level of alcohol in her body dropped, she started to shake, indicating withdrawal. We admitted her for intravenous hydration and detoxification from alcohol.

I felt drawn to her; she was someone who, like me, had made wrong choices. I wanted to do my best for her. Her physical symptoms improved quickly; she would only be in the hospital for a few days. Her real problem was the alcoholism itself. She acknowledged that. She was ready to change her life.

Soon after, my team admitted an alcoholic man in even worse shape—a middle-aged Irish American with yellowed eyes and a big belly. His abdomen had filled with fluid because his liver was no longer working. He had been drinking most of his life. He only had a few more binges left before his drinking killed him. I felt frustrated. I didn't want to put myself out emotionally again. There was no reason; he'd just drink again and die. I only said, “You need to stop drinking” and made him an appointment.

And he did stop. He came to my office the following week. I was his doctor for two years, but I lost track of him before I finished my residency. Maybe he moved away. Maybe he went back to drinking. Even so, he had two years of sobriety, two years of added life. I don't know if I made a difference, or if the healing came from inside himself.

That was one of many times that my patients have surprised and inspired me. These two alcoholics taught me a lesson: I am not in control. I cannot know who is ready to make difficult changes. My job is to do the best I can to encourage, educate and support whoever asks me for help. The rest is out of my hands.

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