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Lawyers, Doctors & Bankers; The Educated High Functioning Addicts of our World

When you think of a typical alcoholic, you don't picture a lawyer or a doctor, and yet it is estimated that between 15-24% of lawyers will suffer from alcoholism during their career*, and doctors are 3 times more likely to develop cirrhosis of the liver than the general population.

Efficiency is not a habit which is traditionally associated with alcoholics but many are capable of feats of organization which few sober people could ever manage. To reach the top of a highly competitive corporate ladder or high profile position and then remain there for years is no easy task, especially when you are an addict. Functional alcoholics are aplenty, particularly in high pressure, high paid jobs. Famous high functioning addicts include Winston Churchill, Boris Yelstin, and Eric Clapton.

The 'functioning alcoholic'

The name given to people who have a serious drinking problem but still remain able to maintain what, for an addict, is a relatively normal existence. Their health, relationships and working life will inevitably suffer but often not to the extent that they become unmanageable.

Admitting you have a problem is universally accepted as being the first step on the road to recovery from addiction but for someone like Gary, an advertising executive in London, alcoholism didn't seem like too much of a problem. He managed to maintain this image of the model professional for several years while in the grip of what, in hindsight, he acknowledges was an addiction to alcohol, but it took its toll on every other aspect of his life,

"I was married to the perfect woman but my drinking cost me my marriage and my kids. I could keep it together at work, I'd get drunk every lunch time but I somehow had the discipline to continue to do a pretty good job. The amazing thing was I was able to continue to stay pretty professional when I was at work, even though I was never sober for more than a few hours at the start of the day and had been prescribed anti depressants which I was taking every single day. However, I couldn't keep it together at home, I think the effort of maintaining a pretence all day in the office just left me drained and once I got home I just needed to drink to relieve the strain."

As a functional alcoholic, Gary* had never previously had to properly face his demons because although his drinking had been problematic the pay cheques still kept coming in which allowed him to sustain his lifestyle. It wasn't until he suffered a family bereavement and whilst he was on compassionate leave, that unbeknownst to his colleagues, he spent the time at The Cabin, a modern residential treatment centre in Chiang Mai.

The idea that a serious addiction will automatically destroy your life is a stereotype which is perpetuated by the British media. In reality, while many people do lose everything as a result of their addiction, there are those, who manage to continue on a comparatively even keel. The problem for these people is that while life goes on there is often very little incentive to seek treatment.

Alistair Mordey, the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin comments:

"People seem to have the view that you must have lost everything and hit rock bottom before you need to access help or seek some kind of treatment. Some people, especially high

functioning people have not lost everything, and there is the view that this somehow makes them a different kind of addict. We must differentiate between a material rock bottom, where the addict loses all their possessions or status, and an emotional rock bottom where they are essentially having what we used to call a nervous breakdown. In rehab we talk about high rock bottoms as opposed to a low rock bottoms; not everyone who hits rehab is coming off a low rock bottom where they have lost everything. Many are coming from a high rock bottom where they still have successful careers but have nowhere to go in terms of mood imbalance and emotional crisis".

High functioning addicts start using for the same reason low functioning addicts do, to self medicate an imbalanced brain chemistry and calm the symptoms of depression, anxiety or lack of focus (hyperactivity). However using addictive drugs or alcohol to make them feel better eventually stops working as the chemicals this produces in the brain become exhausted and both high and low functioning addicts are left with issues that leave them no option but to seek treatment and not rely on addictive processes.

He continues:

"Treatment is about instilling new behaviours which will rebalance brain chemistry. This includes group therapy, exercise, new career or relationships goals etc. which are best implemented intensively in an inpatient setting, daily over a significant time span like 1-3 months. This is arguably why residential programmes are considered more effective.

Having a high rock bottom or a low rock bottom is often nothing more than social and environmental differences between individuals, ie how much we had to start out with. Whether you consistently manage to hang on to your material goods or social position, is not a good way to judge the severity of your addiction, but rather how much damage has it caused and will cause you, emotionally and mentally, is the true judge of whether you need treatment."

Addiction affects millions worldwide, whether it be the 5% of alcoholics on "skid row" or highly functional alcoholics, who are well-educated with good incomes.

Alastair Mordey (BA hons, RDAP, ADAP) is the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin, an addiction treatment centre in Chiang Mai. He is a certified and accredited addiction counsellor with over 10 years' experience working in treatment services. Website: www.thecabinchiangmai.com.

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*** Information from Legal Profession Assistance Conference**