

## Teenage Alcoholism: Bigger Than an Epidemic

By BARBARA LAKER  
Cox News Service

ATLANTA — These teenagers say they have been through hell on earth.

They tell stories of contemplating suicide, stealing money from parents and friends, getting kicked out of school, spending time in jail and not remembering where they spent the night.

Their lives were soaked in alcohol, but they blamed other people and circumstances for their problems. Never the bottle.

Today they can admit they are teenage alcoholics. They are struggling to stay alive, stay sober.

"I live one day at a time," said Mark, a 14-year-old recovering alcoholic who is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. "That's all I can do."

Mark started drinking when he was 9. By the age of 11, "I'd drink maybe once a month 'til I got drunk and passed out." He often told his parents he was going to spend the night at a friend's house, but instead went to a river bank, drinking himself into unconsciousness.

He took liquor from relatives and found a convenience store that would sell beer to him. If he needed money, he stole radios and stereos from department stores for money so he could buy booze.

He started taking drugs, skipped classes and came home at about 11 practically every night, if he came home at all. He was suspended twice and often talked back to his parents. "I turned into an animal in a way," he admit-

ted. "I was running away from life."

On March 5, he drank a 12-pack of beer before he went to school at 8 a.m. He was taken to the principal's office with some other teenagers who had been drinking. Mark hit one of the other kids in front of the principal. His mother came to school and placed him in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program. That proved to be the last day he ever took a drink.

Mark's story is not unusual. There are an estimated 45,000 teenage alcoholics in Georgia.

Even though other drugs like Quaaludes, speed and marijuana are available on school grounds, alcohol is still the most used and abused drug among teenagers. According to a 1980-1981 study in Georgia, 30 percent of the 872 eighth-graders surveyed admitted using alcohol within the past month. That percentage was 48 percent for the 1,012 11th and 12th students surveyed, according to this study, which was conducted by the State Department of Human Resources' alcoholism and drug abuse services section.

"We used to say teenage alcoholism was an epidemic, but it's even greater than that," said Dr. Martha Morrison, a psychiatrist and an expert in addiction at the Ridgeview Institute. The private psychiatric hospital in Cobb County has a unit for adolescents addicted to drugs.

"It's a pandemic," Dr. Morrison said. "Teenagers' use and abuse of it is so vast, it's almost as if it's part of the cultural norm."

A 1975-1982 National Institute on Drug Abuse study shows that even though the number of high schoolers who use marijuana daily has decreased since 1978, daily alcohol use has remained steadily high. Almost 6 percent of high schoolers who graduated in 1982 were daily users of alcohol.

Today, the average age of adolescents experimenting with a drug for the first time is 12. More often than not, this drug is alcohol.

Counselors who work with teenage alcoholics say that alcohol is relatively inexpensive and more socially acceptable and accessible than other drugs. A six-pack of beer or a bottle of wine can be found in many parents' refrigerators every day of the year.

"Lots of parents feel if kids drink beer, they're OK. They think at least they're not smoking marijuana or shooting up," said Dr. Robert Margolis, a clinical psychologist who specializes in adolescent drug abuse. "It's a lot more socially acceptable to drink ... Lots of kids have role models for drinking at home."

Said Dennis Buttmer, assistant director and counselor for STRAIGHT Inc., a drug rehabilitation center in Cobb County, "Alcohol was the same drug their parents used. It's hard for parents to confront their children when they're doing the same thing."

Meanwhile, adolescents are bombarded with TV commercials, magazine ads and songs that make drinking alcohol appear "cool," said Wendy Fredrickson, who counsels adolescents addicted to drugs and

alcohol at Brawner Psychiatric Institute in Smyrna.

When Fredrickson talks to elementary school and high school classes about alcohol abuse, she said, "Fifth graders can sing me beer commercials. They are told that alcohol is wonderful at a very young age."

As a recovered alcoholic, Fredrickson tells students alcoholism is far from blissful. She explains, "It's a disease. It kills people. Young people die from it ... I tell them, 'Be a deviant. Be straight.'"

Although the reasons teenagers take their first drink vary, many say that peer pressure and curiosity played a major role. The problem is, however, that some teenagers have an allergic reaction to alcohol, a disease that allows the drug to control their lives, according to many local counselors.

These teenagers feel they have found something magical that lets them forget their problems and feel comfortable, relaxed and popular. "It was sort of like escaping reality. It put me in my own little world. My own little party," said Sean, an 18-year-old recovering alcoholic. Sean, like other alcoholics, became hooked on that feeling, dependent on alcohol.

"Once they start (drinking) they're trapped," said Margolis, who has offices at the Ridgeview Institute. "Their judgment goes out the window. Their lives revolve around drinking."

Teenage alcoholics, he added, frequently become addicted to another drug. "You rarely see no other drug involved. Among addictive

teens, alcohol and marijuana are big gateway drugs. Most kids start with one or the other and very quickly get involved in a drug lifestyle."

That is exactly what happened to Lisa, 16, a recovering alcoholic who took her last drink Feb. 24, 1982. When she started drinking at 10, she recalled saying to herself, "Yeah. This is it.' It made me feel good. I could open up to people. I could forget a few problems like the family fights that I hated."

Her drinking progressed and she started taking speed and marijuana. During seventh and eighth grade, she and her friends drank before and after school in a sewage tunnel. Drugs were part of her daily routine.

"The only thing I didn't do was heroin and opium. I would have if I had the opportunity," Lisa said.

She hated the taste and smell of brandy and scotch, but if that's all there was, Lisa grabbed it. "I drank anything. I knew I'd get drunk. I wanted to get high," she said. "If I didn't have alcohol, I'd turn to drugs. As long as I could escape."

Lisa did practically anything to achieve that escape. She often stole money from parents and friends to support her habit. "There were only a few times I had to go to bed with a guy to get drugs," she admitted.

Now a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, Lisa realizes, "I drank so people didn't have to see the real me. I never really liked me until I started sobriety. Sobriety is really worth it."

"I really hope it stays this way forever. Someday I want to be a counselor for teenage alcoholics."

### Common Signs of Teenage Alcoholism

Cox News Service

No parent wants to admit his child may be an alcoholic.

It's easier to blame late nights, new drinking friends, skipping classes and poor grades on just a phase that all teenagers go through. But this behavior may spell out a drinking problem. And early recognition and treatment can save a child's life, according to counselors who work with teenagers addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Common signs of teenage alcoholism include:

— Avoiding the family. "They (teen-age alcoholics, always have a reason why they can't be with the family. They prefer to spend a lot of time with their buddies," said Maritza Keen, chief therapist

of the adolescent drug rehabilitation unit at Physicians and Surgeons Hospital. "They don't want to be with mom and dad anymore. They know they won't allow them to drink and get high."

Dr. Gary Forrest, author of the book, "How to Cope with a Teenage Drinker," said, teen-age alcoholics "will often stop eating with the family and start spending a lot of time in the bathroom and bedroom. They may leave home at 3 or 4 a.m. to go somewhere and refuse to go out with the family on weekends or evenings."

"They distance themselves psychologically and physically," added Forrest, who has written seven books about alcoholism and treated alcoholics for 12 years in Colorado.

— Problems at school and with the law. Teenage alcoholics often skip classes and rarely study. Students who made A's and B's may start failing several classes. "They may get suspended, expelled or drop out, sometimes a few days before they're supposed to graduate," Keen said.

At the same time, the teenager may get arrested on such charges as driving under influence of alcohol, public drunkenness or assault, she said.

— Health complaints. "They may appear depressed and tired and complain of stomach aches and headaches," Forrest said.

Also, teenage alcoholics may return home suffering from unexplained accidents, he said. "They may have a knot on their head or a

broken arm, and when asked how it happened, they'll say, 'I don't know how it happened. I can't remember.'"

— Becoming rebellious, angry and resentful. "A parent may ask, 'How was your day,' and the child may say, 'Fine,' then slam their door and play loud music," said Dennis Buttmer, assistant director and counselor at STRAIGHT Inc., a drug rehabilitation center in Cobb County.

Parents may wonder what they have done wrong when their child curses at them and becomes violent, counselors say. The teen-age alcoholic may also physically fight with friends and other people they've never met.

"Many of these youngsters radiate an angry-at-the-world at-

titude. Intoxication is their expression of anger and destruction to others," Forrest wrote in "How to Cope with a Teenage Drinker." "They are angry at parents, siblings, teachers, peers and most importantly, themselves."

In dealing with teen-age drinkers, parents should not act as what Forrest calls "enablers." They should refuse to cover up or lie for the drinker and should never provide him with alcohol.

If a child staggers home drunk one night, Forrest advises parents to wait until morning to discuss the issue. "If you talk that night, the child may only remember bits and pieces of the conversation. He may remember nothing. Also parents are more prone to be

perhaps hysterical."

When the child is sober, parents should talk to him firmly, rationally and non-emotionally about the drinking problem, Forrest said. They should tell the teen-ager, "We need to seek out help. We're going to seek out help."

Counselors say teenagers often deny they have a problem with alcohol. When that happens, Keen said, parents "have to get strict and tough. They should take the approach, 'You have to come with me. We have to do something about this.'"

Names and numbers of treatment centers for alcoholics can be found in the Yellow Pages under the heading, Alcoholic Information and Treatment Centers.