

I am a functional alcoholic.

It was Thursday, June 22 a few years ago that I was first confronted with my alcoholism. The last patient of the day was an emergency. At the time, I didn't know it was an addiction counselor from the McBride Center. My day had started out as what had become my norm - a couple of drinks. It was the end of the day and I was looking forward to getting home so I could start my socially acceptable rounds. Looking forward to and planning these sessions of encounters with a bottle had become an obsession.

What had led up to this point was a drinking problem that had started out as having a few beers with friends then progressing to straight vodka laced with iced tea (for color) and isolation. Weekend binges became daily after work cocktails. And then sneaking drinks throughout the day every day of the week. It took years but I had lost control. Alcohol overpowered my existence.

I am a functional alcoholic. I was able to practice dentistry without any restrictions. I had no problems with patients or with the licensing board but I developed panic attacks and searched for simple reasons to enable me to continue practice. My internist and a clinical psychologist prescribed Valium, then Prozac and finally Xanax. None of these drugs solved my problem. I didn't like the idea of addicting myself to these drugs so I instead increased my use of alcohol. This seemed to be okay in my state of mind.

I contemplated leaving dentistry. I thought that early retirement or a new occupation would put an end to my tribulations. I hated going to work - not knowing when another panic attack would arise. The scary possibility of the unknown filled my every waking thought.

In the mean time, my physical body also took a spiral downward - high blood pressure, esophageal ulcer, intestinal polyps and eventually elevated liver enzymes. I was in a total state of denial. I could not take that first step, alcoholism had control of me.

I saw other people experiencing problems with drugs and alcohol - DWI's, divorce, loss of license, public displays of drunkenness, etc. I didn't have that kind of trouble with alcohol, mine wasn't that obvious to the public.

It was only during the initial stages of my recovery that I found out how many people my alcoholism was affecting - my wife, my daughter, my friends, my staff, my patients and myself.

It's Thursday, June 22 and I am ready to see my last patient of the day. I was waiting in the hall and I noticed my retired partner and 2 other dentists from the area in the waiting room. They, along with the addiction counselor and my staff cornered me in the hall. I knew immediately what was going on. I panicked, I physically tried to escape. "I don't want any part of this", I screamed. "Let me go." After a few moments of struggle I quieted down and we all proceeded to the lounge. It was there that a practiced intervention was carried out.

Today I am very grateful to all of those people that participated in that event that changed my life. My staff, the dentists from the Dentists Concerned for Dentists Committee and the addiction counselor all helped me to take that first step. I left the office and was immediately driven to the Milwaukee Psychiatric Hospital and Herrington Recovery House where my treatment and recovery began.

After going through residential treatment and more than two years of sobriety, I am enjoying my daily life and the practice of dentistry more than ever. It has taken a lot of self discovery, working in the AA program, support from my family, friends and staff to get me to this point. I am deeply grateful.