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Minors who drink — a major problem

By Vidya Iyengar, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Jan 30, 2015, 07:52 PM IST



Teenagers who start drinking early may need expert intervention as it could lead to long-term addiction and health consequences

Priya Nair's 17-year-old son would stay over at friends' homes almost thrice a week. However, one evening, when he came home drunk and began hurling abuses at his parents, Nair began worrying. Two similar episodes in a short span of time and Nair knew that her son needed help.

"Initially, I approached his teachers at college. I was hoping that that would help. But he had poor attendance, and many of them hadn't taken note of it," she says. The mother then convinced her son to visit a counsellor. It took eight months of counselling for the teen to rehabilitate and go back to college. Kala Balasubramanian, who runs Inner Dawn Counselling and Training Services, explains that teenagers who drink face greater chances of getting addicted to alcohol later in life. And it's a growing phenomenon, she observes. "Especially in upper middle class homes, where accessibility to alcohol is easy, this is the case. Adolescents are under a lot of peer pressure and are in a rebellious stage. All this results in addiction," she says. Apart from easy accessibility, the reasons for early drinking include reduced stigma associated with alcohol, less monitoring and larger exposure to it, Balasubramanian adds.

Having treated a teenager for de-addiction, Balasubramanian points out that in many cases children aren't monitored. "They usually begin with beer and then go on to hard liquor. A number of parents don't know how their child got into the habit or how long they have been doing it," she says.

Agrees Uma Warriar, counsellor at Jain Univeristy, who also says that a "larger percentage of students, who have started drinking at a young age, have parents drinking at home or in parties". "They think that it a socially acceptable vice, so they don't feel guilty about drinking and they readily accept this when confronted," she says. In fact, she claims to have come across several cases of students who are referred to her by their teachers due to poor attendance and bad habits. "They accept with ease that they drink. And from my experience as a campus counsellor, most of the students who are exposed early to drinking adults, also take to the habit earlier without any guilt."

There are several ways of countering this problem depending on the severity of the addiction. For instance, in a physical intervention, the patient is put on medication to prevent further damage to the body. "Many a time, patients are put on aversion therapy, where they are given medication which is to be taken on a daily basis. They begin feeling nauseous every time they even smell alcohol," she says.

During the de-addiction phase, teenagers will have withdrawal symptoms including shivering of hands. Depending on how long the person has been consuming alcohol and the quantity, medication is prescribed to control cravings.

In severe cases, they administer shock therapy (mild amounts) which makes the patient associate the shock with alcohol, thus pulling them away from the habit. Emotional counselling, Balasubramanian feels can also work. "Peer groups are brought together, where all the addicts talk about the reasons they are hooked to a particular substance. There is a lot of shame attached to it. But when they come together with similar addicts they may open up," Balasubramanian adds. However, this form of counseling for teenagers is still new in India. Another way of doing this could be one-on-one counselling for a more in-depth analysis of the patient's family background, the reason for unrest, the influence of peer groups and other factors that could be driving them to drink.

It takes all forms of counselling to get teenagers out of a habit. However, Balasubramanian says that there is a fair chance of relapse. "This is because they go back to a similar environment and may get tempted." But there's no reason for parents or teens to lose hope, she adds. "Teens should be equipped with life skills which include being assertive and saying no."

That, in the long run, will help them stand up to many more challenges in life.

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