

ALCOHOLISM HAPPENS TO OTHER PEOPLE

Alcoholism happens to other people, not to us or to the people closest to us. Mostly, alcoholics are the 'skid-row' drunks huddled in city doorways that we try not to notice.

Kate* knows just how false an image this can be. She has witnessed first-hand the way in which the shift from social to problem drinking can creep up unawares and tear a family apart.

In their teens, Kate and younger sister Sue* did what all teenagers do. On a Saturday night they'd go out with their mates and have a 'skin full'. Holidays in Greece and Portugal included all night drinking sessions at discos. But they returned to the 'everyday' without problem.

Time passed, Sue married John* and gave birth to a daughter, Michelle*. Even though she now lived 20 miles away from Kate, the sisters remained close, meeting up once or twice a month.

Kate recalls the first stirrings of unease. "There was the time two or three years ago when I poured myself and Sue a drink at 5 o'clock. 'Oh,' exclaimed John, 'you're starting early again.'"

But the moment of truth came, as the Yorkshire Puddings burned, one Sunday lunch-time in the run up to the Millennium. With Sue's usually punctual family now twenty minutes late, Kate dialled their home. "Where are you?" she asked.

"We're not coming," replied John. "She's in bed. She's drunk again. Don't you realise she's drunk most of the time?" As Kate stood speechless, the 'phone went dead.

For a year, Kate kept her knowledge to herself. But she now became witness to the effects of her sister's increasingly bizarre behaviour. There were the days when the school was unwilling to release seven-year-old Michelle into her mother's care. Two previously close friends were no longer happy for Sue to drive their children home. Sometimes she would park on someone else's drive and try to put her key in the wrong door.

Worse still were the nights when she simply disappeared. John would spend hours driving around in the dark, Michelle at his side, desperately trying to find his wife.

With the problem at least partially acknowledged, you might have expected things to get better. But, although she was drinking more openly, Sue wouldn't discuss the situation. "She became quite nasty, unreasonable and irrational, told me everything was under control and to mind my own business," says Kate.

Things went from bad to worse. The Christmas period saw Sue in a state close to unconsciousness. She spent her days 'topping up' from bottles secreted behind panels in the side of the bath. She was so drunk that John would have to feed her like a baby. As he tried to

get her to bed, Michelle would help by guiding her mother's feet up the stairs. And all the time, the credit card debts were mounting.

The crisis came when the mother of a child in Michelle's class discovered Sue collapsed in the hedge outside Safeway, two empty vodka bottles at her side. It was 11 a.m. on a Saturday morning. An ambulance rushed her to the hospital poisons unit to have her stomach pumped.

12 hours later, woozy and bloated, Sue came too. The consultant didn't mince his words "You really have been behaving abominably," he said. "If you don't get yourself sorted out soon, you'll be dead." At only 4 ft 10 inches tall, Sue's blood alcohol count was the second highest ever recorded by the unit.

It took a repeat performance a week later for Sue to agree to be referred to a psychiatric unit. Here she started to attend meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. Her fellow 'dry' alcoholics included a barrister and a vet – a far cry from 'skid row'. In the last 8 or 9 months the group members have become her closest friends. "They're aware of how frail they are, how frail we all are," says Kate.

Sadly, Sue's marriage has fallen casualty to her illness. She shares custody of her daughter with John. Michelle has overcome her initial fear of her mother and, for now at least, seems relatively unscathed. Sue seems "together and happy".

Kate still avoids drinking in front of her sister and feels embarrassed if drink is mentioned. Her mother won't have alcohol in the house. Family relationships have been changed irrevocably.

"People tend to joke about other people who have too much to drink, yet not about Ecstasy or Cocaine," says Kate. "It's such a thin line between a girls' or boys' night out and the hole Sue fell into. Think twice before you laugh about drink. It can be a serious problem that ripples out across the whole family."

Word Count: 779 words

* (Names have been changed to preserve anonymity)

If you need help as a result of your own or someone else's alcoholism, you may wish to contact one or more of the following:

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

NATIONAL HELP LINE: 0845 7697555

AA (WILTSHIRE): 01225 840329 (meetings are held at a number of different venues in the area)

WEB SITE: <http://www.aa-uk.org.uk/>

The Alcohol Advisory Centre

13 Milton Road, Swindon

TEL: (01793) 695405

Offers information, support and counselling to problem drinkers and their families.

Al-Anon Family Groups/Alteen

TEL: 0207 403 0888

WEB SITE: <http://www.hexnet.co.uk/alanon/>

Offers help to the families and friends of problem drinkers

Turning Point

TEL: 0207 702 2300

WEB SITE: <http://www.turning-point.co.uk/>

Runs nearly 100 projects nationally for people with serious problems related to drug and alcohol misuse.

Gina Dennis, 20/10/2002

(Written from a staged interview as a course assignment)