

## HOW TO ASSESS A DRINKING PROBLEM: HAVE YOU EVER HAD A DRINKING PROBLEM?

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Psychologists who provide evaluation and treatment of alcohol use disorder have an old adage, "If you ever have problems with alcohol, then alcohol may be the problem." How can you determine whether you might have a drinking problem? According to two studies conducted a decade apart (Cyr & Wartman, 1988, p. 5; Woodruff, Clayton, Cloninger, & Guze, 1976), the most sensitive question used to identify alcohol problems was the very straightforward yet less traditional question, "Have you ever had a drinking problem?"

Aside from some of the extensive diagnostic procedures used by clinical psychologists and alcohol researchers, there are some relatively simple methods that have been developed to screen for alcoholism. One of the most commonly used interview techniques for determining whether a person has an alcohol problem is the CAGE questionnaire. The letters C-A-G-E form an acronym representing four important questions related to problem drinking. The questions are:

- C:** Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- A:** Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
- G:** Have you ever felt guilty about your drinking?
- E:** Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning (an eye-opener) to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?

Although diagnosis of an alcohol disorder cannot be based solely on an assessment device such as the CAGE questionnaire, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) considers a "yes" to any one of the CAGE questions to be evidence of an alcohol problem. In fact, 90% of known alcoholics can be correctly identified by their CAGE

responses. Psychologists often use a score of 2 or 3 as a cutoff for identifying patients with alcohol-related problems.

Another important consideration involves the question, "How much alcohol is too much?" Although alcoholism cannot be defined solely in terms of amount of consumption, the NIAAA has established criteria (Friedman, et al., 2001) that are useful in identifying individuals with alcohol disorders. For men, more than 14 drinks a week or 4 drinks per occasion is considered a sign of alcohol abuse or alcoholism. For women, more than 7 drinks per week or 3 drinks per occasion is considered problematic.

If you have problems with alcohol, then alcohol may be the problem. Recognizing the problem is the first step toward finding a solution.

### References

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