

# Depression and Addiction

Non-depressed men turn to mood-altering behaviours like drinking, gambling, or sex for relaxation, intimate sharing, or fun. Covertly depressed men turn to such substances or activities to gain relief from distress. G. Alan Marlatt, director of the University of Washington's Addictive Behaviour Research Centre, found that both addictive and recreational drinkers felt a positive enhancement of mood from the physiological effects of alcohol. The difference between the two groups was that normal drinkers began with relatively good feelings from the start, while alcoholics started off with an experience of internal pain. However, the relief in such defensive maneuvers is illusory. After the wave of intoxication passes, the covertly depressed man finds himself back in the same distressed state where he began, or worse ....

Theories about exactly what those who self-medicate are medicating vary, some focussing on the enhancement of self-esteem, others on the regulation of feelings, still others on self-soothing. An addict's choice of drug may rest on that drug's particular medication properties. Alcohol, for example, relieves a sense of inner emptiness and coldness by warming and disinhibiting, often making one more sociable. The first person on record to recognize these qualities was Aristotle, who reasoned that since the cause of depression, the humour bile, was dry and cold, depressed people used drink to bring heat and liveliness into their systems. From a psychological perspective, Aristotle's observations about the effects of alcohol are not far off the mark. By contrast, opioids, like heroin, do not warm one up so much as calm one down, tranquilizing the ferocity of depression, the agitation and self-hatred. Cocaine brightens a person, giving them energy; it breaks through the numb, dead feeling of alexathymia. It may be that the particular aspect of depression a person feels most strongly - such as emptiness, agitation, or numbness - determines that person's choice of a particular drug.

*Terrence Real, I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the secret legacy of male depression. Fireside (Simon & Schuster), New York, NY, 1997, pp60-61.*

*From Everyman: A Men's Journal, Issue 69*