Dear Alice

I decided to stop drinking five days ago. I have been a very heavy drinker for the last few years and I was expecting to feel shaky and have headaches etc., but so far I have just felt extreme tiredness. I can barely get up the energy to move around and I have been sleeping for more than 14 hours a day (compared with only six or seven hours normally). This seems strange to me as I always thought alcohol was a depressant and I was expecting to be full of energy now that I don't have it pumping through me all the time.

Do you think the tiredness could be as a result of not drinking or could this be something else?

Answer

Dear Reader,

First of all, kudos for reaching out about what can be a significant life change for many. Experts define "heavy drinking" in a number of ways, but regardless of how much you were drinking, quitting is a big commitment to make to yourself. The exhaustion you're experiencing may be due to symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. The more heavily a person had been drinking, the more likely they are to develop symptoms when they stop. Withdrawal symptoms include insomnia, fatigue, cravings, and mood instability, all of which can last from three to twelve months. The severity of symptoms are most acute for the first week or two, and lessen as time passes.

It sounds like fatigue is the main concern you've encountered, and this may be due to a disrupted sleep cycle, which is a typical symptom of both chronic drinking and the early stages of withdrawal. Both heavy drinking and its cessation can alter the circadian pattern of sleep [2], increasing the ratio of REM stage sleep to the more restful deep stage sleep. It's also possible that changes in your sleep pattern may cause you to wake up periodically throughout the night, which could make you feel more tired during the day. This alteration of the sleep cycle is usually reversed by three months of sobriety, if not sooner.

Your exhaustion could also be due to dehydration. Alcohol dehydrates the body, and the last few years of heavy drinking may have significantly dehydrated you. During this early period of sobriety it might help you to drink lots of water. Eating nourishing food, getting enough (but not
excessive) sleep, and treating your body well in other ways can help your body better deal with and recover from withdrawal symptoms. If you feel you need help dealing with the process of quitting drinking, you might want to seek out a mental health professional or a support group. Alcoholics Anonymous [3] is one such group and if you’re interested, you can check out their website for more information on local chapters and meetings near you.

If the exhaustion continues or you have symptoms strong enough to keep you from completing day-to-day activities, you may want to consider talking with a health care provider. They can help you get to the bottom of what may be behind your decreased energy and identify any other medical conditions that are related to your lethargy.

Good luck with these changes and may deep rest find you soon.

Alice!
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