

Here come the holidays. For some people, they conjure up visions of sugarplums. But others greet the holidays with dread and turn to alcohol to help get them through the season.

This month can be especially tough on the sexual minorities community, which already is susceptible to drinking problems. Plenty of people postpone coming out by keeping themselves anesthetized with booze, then survive their minority status by numbing their psyches. And for far too many, once the drinking-to-cope pattern is established, it spirals out of control.

Larry Rogers is a counselor serving alcohol- and drug-abusing sexual minorities. He is also a gay man who is in recovery for chemical dependency.

He feels certain that "being alone with a secret" is a strong factor causing so many sexual minorities drink to excess. Rogers sees many conflicts similar to the ones he endured in his gay clients.

"A lot of gay people are drinking because they are denying who they are. They think it's not OK to be gay, lesbian, trans and so forth. Like me, they don't realize they are walking around with that much shame."

Rogers was raised Catholic. "The church said I would go to hell for even thinking of [having sex with men]. And even in the schoolyard, I knew it wasn't safe. So I shut down my feelings and shut down who I was

until I started drinking in high school. When I was drinking, I could put away my fears and guilt."

About 10 years ago, Rogers realized he was drinking and using drugs too much. "I got arrested for drunk driving and knew things had to change. That was in 1985," he recalls.

He put himself into outpatient therapy at St. Vincent's. "It was magical," he says, "coming out of that drug and alcohol haze. It changed my life."

Mary started drinking when she was 15. (Alcoholics Anonymous traditionally asks the media to use first names only.) She says it didn't have anything to do with her sexuality at first. "I would still be an alcoholic if I wasn't a lesbian," she asserts.

Still, she finds a connection between her alcoholism and her sexuality. "I didn't even

DROWNING IN HOLIDAY SPIRITS

The Christmas season can be especially difficult for recovering alcoholics by Heron

know I was a lesbian [as a teen-ager]. I tried to fit in, and alcohol really helped. I know I would not have done the things I did with boys if I hadn't been drinking. [While drinking] I had no ability to say no to dates. Alcohol seemed like a very important part of socializing."

Mary came out during her first year at college. "At 17 I kissed a woman," she recalls. "We both had to drink a bottle of Wild Irish Rose in order to

get the courage to kiss. I still remember the 'aha' that came over me—oh, that feeling that came over me!"

Mary points out that part of the connection between alcoholism and homosexuality is historical. "Twenty-five years ago, we socialized in bars. There wasn't any Lesbian Garden Club. There were seedy little bars on the other side of the tracks. So, all your friends drank."

Although so much has changed—espe-

cially in cities like Portland with its significant sexual minorities community—alcohol remains a central part of the gay experience. Even today, people still flock to establishments that survive by selling alcohol. "So, where do you go to find other gay people?" Mary asks.

She went to her first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in 1983. "It was awful. There were all these old men smoking," she recalls. "That was not for me."

But the seed was planted. "Over the next four years, I spent a lot of energy thinking about my drinking. It's just like worrying about being gay," she laughs. "Straight people don't spend a lot of time worrying about being gay, and people who are not alcoholics don't worry about being drunks. Just the same, it was a long process."

That process took a positive turn when Mary

started going to gay AA meetings regularly in the summer of 1987. "It made all the difference in the world. Today I can be at straight AA meetings and be OK," she says. "But before I found gay meetings I was too uncomfortable to concentrate on the drinking issue. It's all supposed to be about getting [sober], but still I had to get past that gay thing. It was a great comfort to be around other gays."

What do the holidays have to do with alcoholism? "Everything and nothing. An alcoholic is going to drink for nothing, because the day of the week ends in y," Mary quips.

But she points out: "Alcohol is part of the holidays, and there is more forgiveness for people to drink at social and family gatherings. [Alcoholics] say that New Year's is when the amateurs drink. Holidays have special significance for gays because so many of us are evicted from our families. Everyone else goes home for the holidays."

For a long time, Mary felt unwelcome in her family of origin. "When I got sober, I found I had a cool family. I had blinders on when I drank. I was self-centered. I knew everything. Drinking was how I rejected them. It took a few years for me to realize they didn't hate me. They even came to our wedding 10 years ago."

Mary is now 43. She will celebrate 13 years of sobriety in January.

Still, she considers herself "in recovery." She says, "I still work the 12 steps every day."

Rogers asserts alcohol and drug abuse spirals out of control during the holidays for several reasons. "First, it's hard for everyone to go back to their homes of origin. It's especially hard for those of us who are not fully accepted for who we are," he says. "Society tells us that drinking is OK during the holidays. Holidays mean going home. And for many of us, going home for the holidays means going back to our original pain."

This can be hell for some sexual minorities. "Like everyone else," Rogers says, "we want the perfect family. Maybe this time we will all love each other. But the old patterns continue until we learn to change them." He helps people change these patterns but says, "It takes time."

Thanks to the efforts of community members of the past, help is available especially for gay men and lesbians who want to free themselves from alcoholism. Rogers encourages people to get help sooner rather than later.

"You don't have to wait until you hit bottom.... Get help while you still

have a life and you still have resources." j

"Like everyone else, we want the perfect family. Maybe this time we will all love each other. But the old patterns continue until we learn to change them. It takes time."

—Larry Rogers

The LIVE AND LET LIVE CLUB holds a 21st Anniversary Party featuring a speakers panel, potluck dinner and dance music from 6 p.m. to midnight Dec. 15 at Helensview High School, 8678 N.E. Sumner St. For more information call 503-238-6091.

HERON is a Portland artist and free-lance writer.



The Live and Let Live Club reaches out to the lesbian and gay recovery community through 12-step meetings and social activities

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