

Anna: The Days of Wine and Roses: When Your Partner Drinks Too Much. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 230.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Anna: I'm Anna Riley, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. How much is too much? When does drinking become a problem? Imagine meeting someone, you start going out on romantic dates, dates that maybe, include a bottle of wine, candles, roses, the whole nine yards. Initially, the alcohol acts as an intimacy enhancer, it helps you both loosen up and relax. But what happens when down the road, the alcohol becomes toxic. When one partner begins to develop a drinking problem, the other might start to feel like the alcohol has taken top priority in the relationship. Any bit of consumption can start to be a big deal, and the partners could begin to withdraw from each other creating an even bigger issue.

Our guest today, Dr. Julia Messer, is here to talk about the ways a couple can address and deal with alcohol related relationship problems. Julia is a licensed psychologist with Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Formerly a high school teacher, Julia has worked to help people develop practical coping solutions in various challenging solutions. Welcome to the show, Julia. I'm glad you can be with us today.

Julia: Thank you for having me, Anna. I appreciate it.

Anna: Sure thing. All right so let's talk about all of this. When can someone tell if alcohol is beginning to get in the way of their relationship? Especially if the two partners have always kind of drank together.

Julia: I think really, when it starts to affect the relationship itself and what typically would be everyday functioning in normal situations. So an increase in arguing when alcohol is involved or even the intensity of the arguments is increasing what would normally be just something minor that two people would get over pretty quickly it becomes a huge hour-long ordeal. Or when one or both people feel like they can't do anything without it. So if there's a concert or they're going to dinner, making sure that the alcohol is there it's important to them.

Anna: I see. So then that kind of seems like, if that's the case that could start to potentially pose a larger problem if someone feels like they have to have alcohol all the time. So are we talking about sort of a minor alcohol problem? Like one that just gets in the way of the relationship. It seems like a serious drinking problem would require more than just a little talk.

Julia: Right. How big of a problem it is in part is defined by how it's affecting that person's life. So if it is affecting the relationship then that alone would indicate that it's becoming a little bit serious. Whereas kind of a minor alcohol problem is a sunny thing to say because if it is a problem then on some level or to one of the people it's serious.

Anna: Right.

Julia: So we're not talking in-patient rehab or anything like that. But serious in the sense of its impairing relationships or it could be. So if one person says, "Hey, I think we're having a problem here, and this is a big deal to me." That, in one way, could define the seriousness of it. Now, the level of treatment, that is a different thing. It could just definitely not be something that someone has to go to rehab for, but if it's

a problem it's a problem kind of thing. Whether it means that that person just needs to stop on their own or get help, either way.

Anna: I see. So to get a little serious, kind of, for a second. If we're talking about, like you said, if it's a problem then it's a problem ultimately, but if we are talking about a much more serious alcohol problem, like alcoholism or addiction, then what do you think, because that can't be easy to deal with, obviously. So what is the best way for a partner in a marriage if they see this happening? How do they approach their spouse about this big problem?

Julia: Yeah. You're right. It's really tricky because people do become very, very sensitive and defensive if it is a problem. There are different ways to approach it, but one way is to kind of basically take a lighter approach and just say I'm concerned about you. And not really make it about the relationship as much as you make it about a concern about that person and just let . . . inaudible 05:51]. Outside help involved I think when it's a real serious problem that's suggesting, "Hey, do you care if we both go talk to someone? I'm having concerns about us and about you." And maybe a neutral person can intervene and talk to the person who's having a bigger problem without it being as emotional. But it is tricky in any situation because part of having a substance abuse problem is denying that's a problem. So it's not an easy conversation to start or have.

Anna: Right. So what do you see that starts to happen between a married couple when one partner starts to drink more and more and maybe kind of starts to develop a little bit of a drinking problem?

Julia: Well, there's definitely tension and as I said earlier an increase in arguing that tends to happen. The person who's not drinking as much might kind of even be reactive if any alcohol is around. So they're immediately on guard or dreading what's to come. And then the other person, the one person who's drinking might feel like the other person stopped being fun. "Gosh, you can't loosen up; you can't have a good time" And so that creates arguments and tension as well. And then the kind of ultimate end to this is that the partners just avoid each other completely and start to lead separate lives or just shut down and become emotionally distant.

Anna: Yeah. So for the partner who isn't drinking or drinking as much as the other partner, how do they start to feel about their relationship in this kind of situation?

Julia: I think they feel a sense of not being important, and as I said earlier kind of feeling distant. And the drinking is more important than them or more important than connecting with them. And using them as support and it's more that the alcohol is the support for that person. So I think there's just a sense of distance and lack of priority. They start feeling unimportant.

Anna: Right. Definitely. For the partner who isn't drinking too much, it seems like they obviously might even have a harder time coping with any of these issues because maybe the other person is turning to alcohol to numb the feelings that they're having, or if they're dealing with pain or emotional issues. Do you see that happening that the partner I guess ultimately maybe, the partner who is drinking a lot they would develop bigger problems. But the person who isn't drinking as much, they tend to have a harder time coping, do you see that happening?

Julia: It's interesting because you could almost argue that the person drinking the alcohol has a harder time coping than the person not. Because that's what they're doing in order to cope with stress or with problems in the relationship. It's just, "I don't want to deal with this in a direct way, and it's just easier to

numb and kind of avoid it essentially” whereas the person who's not drinking as much may be less prone to avoidance and want to just deal with it. You're right, what is harder more than the coping is just that the person who's not drinking doesn't get that benefit of escape.

Anna: Right.

Julia: They have to live with it. So in that way, yeah, it's harder for them in a sense that they're having to just accept it and cope with it in the moment. But ultimately, the person who's drinking probably has less coping resources than the person who doesn't have to drink.

Anna: Right, so that's why they start drinking.

Julia: Could be one reason.

Anna: Or that's their way of coping.

Julia: Yes.

Anna: Do you think that, I guess the problems that arise, especially if someone starts drinking a lot, is it more of an internal issue for them? I guess, it could vary, but do you think it's an internal thing or maybe, they're starting to drink more because of relationship problems?

Julia: And that question is kind of debated and argued in journals. If the alcoholism is more biological, or more because of the environment, it can go either way. I think that there has been research that points to a genetic or just a biological factor with alcoholism and it does tend to run in families. So the way that the alcohol is actually processed in the body could be different for different people. Its effect essentially is a little bit different. So in that way it looks as if there is kind of a biological component to it. On the other hand, any problems, whether they're relationship problems, work, stress, even things like depression or anxiety, may cause someone to turn to the alcohol to deal with that problem because it's a fast way to feel better, basically. So that's kind of a million dollar question. But what research does suggest is that there does seem to be a biological difference with people who have the full-blown alcoholism problem.

Anna: Now talking about the partner who is doing the drinking; what kind of things do you see them saying to their partner who isn't drinking as much? And they aren't recognizing it as a problem yet or maybe they do and they don't want to admit it. Whatever the case is, how do you think that they are perceiving the relationship? And how do you think they perceive their partner who started to not drink as much?

Julia: I think this is the real tricky part about how the relationship started. Because that's what that person's focused on is well we used to do this. This is what used to be fun for us, and this is how . . . There's a lot of positive feelings about the way that the alcohol functioned in the relationship in the beginning before it may have been perceived as a problem. So with them, it's just this difference of why now. “This used to be fun. What is your problem? This used to be a positive thing for us.” So it might seem as if the person is changing, or being picky, or creating problems where that person doesn't see any exist. And that's what makes it really difficult to address.

Anna: Yeah. Do you think that it's maybe, a red flag if, say the couple did not start out drinking together or anything like that. Maybe, they didn't really drink that much, or they didn't drink at all or it was just very minimal and then one partner starts to drink a lot more. Would that be a red flag for a potentially big problem coming up?

Julia: It could be. It's tricky because in our culture alcohol usage is prevalent. It's part of football Sunday, it's part of holiday parties, so it's part of a lot of people's evenings, is to have a glass of wine at the end of the night to unwind. And in some cases, it really doesn't mean that there's a huge problem. You can drink in moderation, a person can, and it not be a problem. But I think when you introduce an idea of a couple, then the definition changes because if one person says, "This is a problem for me, your alcohol use." That could be very different than another couple where each person has 4-6 drinks a night, which is quite a bit, honestly. Point being that it's different for different couples. What one partner might see as a problem. another one might not. So what's a red flag; increased alcohol use could be a sign of a problem. It could also be depending on how much is being used, it could mean nothing except it could mean the person not drinking has a problem with it, any use or even moderate, and that's totally OK. It becomes about the couple working that out and recognizing it as a problem together.

Anna: So what can couples do to correct this issue before it gets out of control or before it gets too far gone for them?

Julia: I think the important thing is to address it and to talk about it as it occurs. It doesn't have to be this huge thing that is brought up. If one person has a problem and thinks that their partner is maybe, having a few too many on a Sunday afternoon to say, "I've noticed that you've already had a few beers. Can we do something else?" Or "I would really appreciate it if you maybe switch to coke." And talk about it later or talk about it in that sense. But I think the important thing is just to bring it up so that it's not something that builds resentment and becomes the elephant in the room. And just to say, "Look, we need to talk about this." And maybe, even have the dialogue of, "I noticed that you're drinking a lot more. Why is that? Is something wrong? Is there something bothering you? Are you more stressed out? Are there other ways that we can relax because I've noticed you've really started relying on the wine a little bit much?"

And then as the use or as the situation becomes more serious, then it might require like we were talking about earlier a more serious intervention. But I think when you're just starting out, I think you can do it in a way that as it's happening is communicating how you feel about it.

Anna: I'm curious about the function of the alcohol. Do you think that plays a big part in why they drink? Do you think that couples can start to correct the problem if they know where it begins?

Julia: Absolutely. So if one person says, "Hey, I've noticed that you've been really drinking more and more wine at the end of the day. I can tell you're really stressed out. Do you think that it's stress? Are you trying to deal with a lot of work stress?" And if they talk about it and say, "Yeah, that's what it is. I'm feeling a lot of pressure at work. Well, let's talk about different ways that we can help you with your stress.

Anna: Right.

Julia: And the person could be completely open to it and say, "Yeah, I don't really like drinking as much wine as I have been because I don't feel good in the morning. What could we do? Maybe, we could go

work out or take a walk around the neighborhood or do things like that.” Whereas, if it's bigger than that if one person says, “I'm fundamentally unhappy. This is the only time of the day that I feel happy.” Then you can look at getting more serious help with that problem. I think another time, I guess, that you would want to ask a professional to intervene or see if you could get professional help is if the function can't be identified. If a person says, “I don't know, or I don't see it, or I don't think it is a problem.” Then that's when a professional could help and come in and say, “Let's figure out what's going on here.’

Anna: Right. Well Julia, is there anything else that we should know?

Julia: I think we've pretty much addressed it all. I do think that you're right, this can be something that's really minor and is a problem. But it can be addressed as a couple and pretty quickly dealt with. Or on the other end of the spectrum, it can signal something much more impairing and can be something that requires some help to get over. But I think that it's catching it early, talking about it, and figuring out, like you said, the function of it. And if that can be done early, then hopefully it can be corrected before it becomes too problematic.

Anna: Right. Definitely. Julia, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Julia: You're very welcome.

Anna: To find out more about Julia and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com. I'll spell that for you, and also I will put a link to that in the show notes. That's O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N solutions.com, or you can call 919-428-2766 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Anna Riley, until next time Stay Happily Married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you would like more information, please visit us on the web at StayHappilyMarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.