

Feature Writer

# For some female alcoholics there is an even heavier burden

Society still views the female alcoholic, when the problem is addressed at all, as the promiscuous lush who should be content with her husband, family, and home. Whether the problem is confronted or not, the message is clear: Nice women do not become alcoholics! The alcoholic woman is made to feel useless, ashamed, and dirty.

Lesbian alcoholics not only must deal with the usual stereotypes thrown at women, but also must cope with the belief that they were "sick" before they were alcoholic because of their sexual orientation. This latter burden, formed and placed by an ill-informed and misguided society, is often the very reason that the lesbian finds herself drowning in alcohol.

Not long ago, a lesbian friend and I were discussing how it was unfortunate that so many women believe that the bar scene is the "be all, end all" of lesbianism. So many lesbians, because of the bar scene, become slaves to alcohol. Booze brings them together, booze temporarily allows them to forget their problems from the straight world, and booze also loosens their inhibitions.

Sasha Lewis, in her book *Sunday's Women*, comments that the lesbian bar is usually the first connecting spot a woman has with lesbians. The camaraderie, sympathetic atmosphere, and booze are sometimes her only safe haven from the hostile world outside the bar.

Marilyn Fenner, in a 1976 study of 162 lesbians, gathered these statistics: 68% of the women go to gay bars often . . . 7% go at least weekly, 25% go several times a month, and 13% at least go once or twice a year.

The bar scene, whether gathering to meet, or cruising for a brief encounter or soul mate, is only one reason the lesbian becomes acquainted with — and begins to abuse — alcohol. There are many other reasons that need to be explored. Among these are: 1) societal pressures to conform to the heterosexual way; 2) fear of exposure as a lesbian at work or at home; 3) feelings that one is inferior, or less of a person, for being homosexual; and last, but not least, 4) one's inability to face one's sexual orientation, for whatever reason.

A friend, Sissy, expressed to me a

concern about her drinking habits. Afraid to visit a psychologist and knowing my concern about lesbians and alcoholism, Sissy unburdened herself to me. Sissy's story was not unusual.

Her drinking escalated when she began to come to terms with her sexual orientation.

Sissy drinks to "forget" she is a lesbian. She desperately wishes to be straight, and somehow, believes that one day she will awake, along with her usual massive hangover, magically purged of her lesbian

desires. Sissy's depression, self-hate, and doubt were causing her growing abusive habits. When she finally came to me, her cycle of self-hate — self-abuse with alcohol — more self-hate, was driving her towards seriously contemplating suicide. Each day looked darker than the day before.

Not surprisingly, the few lesbian experiences Sissy has participated in took place during heavy drinking binges. She chose to believe that these encounters only occurred



— Linda Dewey

## Important Numbers For Women With Drinking Problems

- Approximately one-third of the 9-10 million alcoholics in the United States are women; and since 1971, one-third of new Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) members are female.
- Alcoholics Anonymous Central Office (Ferndale): (313) 541-6565.
- Gay meeting (men and women) of Alcoholics Anonymous: open meetings on the first Friday of each month at Central United Methodist Church at Adams and Woodward in Detroit. For more information call the Wayne County Alcoholics Anonymous Inter-Group Office at: (313)

962-9191.

• Sacred Heart of the Downtown Detroit Y.W.C.A. Out-patient open meetings, for more information call: (women only) 963-6045.

• Women for Sobriety meet Tuesdays, 1-3 pm at Schoolcraft College, Newman House, Livonia. Call (313) 591-6400, ext. 430. Meetings are also held Wednesdays, 7 pm at Outer Drive Hospital, Dining Room A, 26400 Outer Drive, Lincoln Park. Call (313) 271-7571 evenings or weekends.

For more information regarding other meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (gay/lesbian, or women), please feel free to call the Wayne County Alcoholics Anonymous Inter-Group Office.

## **Lesbian alcoholics are faced with a double burden**

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because she was "too drunk to properly prevent" them.

Sissy's first positive move in many months was to admit to herself the problems underlying her abusive habits. Her next positive move was to confide in someone close who cares. I also suggested that she call the substance abuse center on the college campus in our town, as well as the Alcoholics Anonymous number in the phone book, and ask specifically if there was a women's group in which she could participate.

Counseling from a campus psychologist and the help of a women's support group made Sissy further identify and cope with her fears and insecurities. Sissy began to realize that there is a growing problem of alcoholism not just among lesbians, but that there are special complications involved when a woman (not necessarily lesbian) is alcoholic. Sissy found that being lesbian compounded the antagonism and disgust that society heaps upon the female alcoholic.

While a revolution of sorts would

be required to relieve our lesbian sisters of the stigma that lesbianism incurs, we women must band together and lend our talents to further research and help alleviate our sisters' special plights. Men cannot, and will not, do this for us!

It is not new that many lesbians turn to alcohol seeking comfort against feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and isolation. Of course, not every lesbian turns to alcohol or drugs for solace when turmoil or loneliness strikes her life. Nor does every lesbian experience the same frustrations and anxieties. It is easy for women to ignore our lesbian sisters with drinking problems, just as society wishes to ignore heterosexual women with the same problem.

What women, as sisters, must do is allow the alcoholic lesbian to come out of her alcoholic closet and listen to her in support groups as well as in private. We must establish better networks from which the alcoholic lesbian may seek help. Most important, we must stop judging our alcoholic lesbian sisters as being weak or inferior; women have a hard enough road to walk in society. When a lesbian sister stumbles in her struggle, we must be there to help her back on the road — our road — toward freedom from oppression!

— Suzanne