

**Lisa Frederiksen**

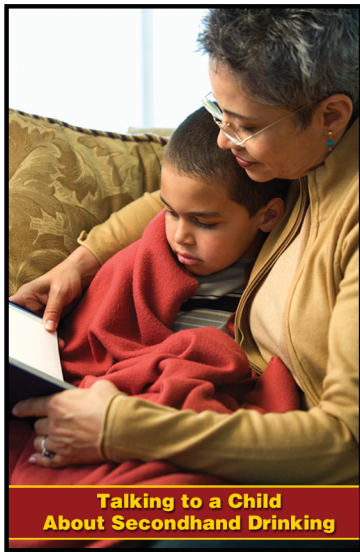


**Talking to a Child  
About Secondhand Drinking**

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***the Impacts on a Child When a  
Family Member Drinks Too Much***





## Talking to a Child About Secondhand Drinking –the Impacts on a Child When a Family Member Drinks Too Much

Dear Parent, Older Sibling, Teacher, Grandparent or Concerned Family Friend,

Thank you – thank you for taking the time to help a child understand the truth of what happens when daddy (or mommy or brother or sister) drinks too much. Helping a child understand secondhand drinking – the impacts on the child and other family members – can change that child’s life. This booklet is arranged in four sections:

- [Section I:](#) Rachael’s Story – When Daddy Drinks (Ages 3 & Up), Starting on Page 2
- [Section II:](#) 9 Key Concepts to Convey to a Child, Starting on Page 7
- [Section III:](#) 5 Key Facts About Alcohol Abuse, Alcoholism and Secondhand Drinking, Starting on Page 9
- [Section IV:](#) Key Resources, Starting on Page 14

Through Rachel’s story, we get a sense of what happens to her daddy and everyone in her family when her daddy drinks too much. It is included to give you some places from which to start to help a child become better able to share his or her own story.

Following Rachael’s story are the Key Concepts you will want that child to understand. These are followed by Key Facts, and the concluding pages have Key Resources for further information.

The good news is that there has been some amazing research conducted in just the past 10-15 years – much in just this Century. This research is helping us better understand alcohol abuse, alcoholism and secondhand drinking (which is the impact of a person’s drinking behaviors on others – the impacts experienced by Rachael and her family, for example). Much of this research is due in large part to new imaging technologies that allow scientists and medical professionals to study the living human brain in action and over time. They can actually see what alcohol misuse does to the brain and therefore why it affects a person’s behaviors. This research is shattering the misinformation, shame and denial that surround a loved one’s drinking problem and helping the family get the help that’s needed.

So, let’s begin with Rachael’s story...

## **Section I: Rachael's Story - When Daddy Drinks (Ages 3 and Up)**

by

**Lisa Frederiksen**

When daddy drinks

Everything Changes.

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Mommy gets her scary look and says in her best happy voice, "Children, time to go to bed."

"But," I say, "We just finished dinner."

Mommy's happy voice comes out low and serious this time, "I said, it's time to go to bed. Now!"

And even though it is nowhere near our bedtime, and we haven't even brushed our teeth, yet, we know we'd better just do it.

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Then mommy and daddy start fighting.

Mommy tells daddy he drinks too much.

Daddy yells – really yells loud, "Would you just stop nagging me! Can't a guy relax in his own home after a long day at work? Of course you wouldn't know what that's like. You just sit here all day!"

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I put my fingers in my ears and sing a song really loud inside my head so I can't hear them.

Sometimes I try to smush my pillow over my head, but no matter what I do, there is always a crack and the yelling gets in.

I get scared. And confused. But mostly really scared.

When mommy comes to tuck me in, I can tell she has been crying. But when I ask her what's wrong, she says, "Nothing. I'm fine. Go to sleep now."

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But I know my mommy is not fine, and I do not go to sleep for a long, long time.

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When daddy drinks, sometimes he gets a mean look on his face, and then yells at my big brother. He calls him stupid and lazy.

But that's not true. My brother is always helping mommy, and I hear mommy tell him how proud of him she is when he shows her his school papers.

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I can tell it makes my brother really mad when daddy calls him stupid and lazy. And really sad.

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And, then my big brother gets a mean look on his face. And my daddy yells at him, "Wipe that look off your face! Get out of here."

Sometimes my big brother punches my little brother on his way out of the room.

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But my little brother doesn't punch back. He just goes in his room and closes the door.

When I knock, he says, "Go away," but he doesn't even sound like my little brother.

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Sometimes my big brother storms out of the house after my daddy yells at him. Mommy sounds scared when she asks, "Where are you going?"

He shouts, "Out!"

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That's all he says, but it makes mommy cry. Maybe she cries because he slammed the door, too. We're not supposed to slam the door.

She looks at me so sad and tells me to give her a hug.

I run into her arms and ask her if she wants to hold my Suzie Doll for a while. That makes her cry harder. I pat her hand and tell her, "It's okay, Mommy, it's okay." But I don't know if it's okay. That's just what she tells me when I get sad.

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I wish daddy didn't drink.

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If my daddy didn't drink, I could have my best friend, Jackie, over to play. She keeps asking me, "Why can't we play at your house?"

I tell her I can't have friends over. But that's not really true.

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And then Jackie says, “I bet you just don’t want me there.”

That’s not true, either.

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I don’t want her to see my daddy asleep on the couch with all of his beer cans.

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Mostly I’m afraid we might make noise and wake him up. My daddy gets really, really mad if we do that.

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And if daddy started yelling at us for waking him, Jackie might not want to be my friend anymore. Or she might tell the other kids at school or even our teacher.

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I think I’ll give Jackie my new doll the next time she asks to play at my house. Then she’ll stay my best friend.

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Sometimes in the morning when I come down to breakfast, Daddy is so nice and funny and asks me what I’m going to do in school.

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I am so happy and start to tell him about our field trip to the park, but then I hear mommy slamming cupboards and asking daddy in a mean voice, “What kind of cereal do you want?”

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I don’t understand why she’s mean to daddy when he’s trying to be so nice. When I ask her if she’s okay, she says, “I’m fine. Now eat your cereal.”

I don’t think she’s fine, but I don’t want to make her more mad so I eat my cereal, fast, so I don’t say a word.

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Sometimes in the morning, daddy even comes to my room and wakes me up with a big hug and lots of kisses and tells me he loves me.

I tell him I love him too. I do.

He’s my daddy.

But then he drinks, again, and stares at me when I talk to him like I am not even there.

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I just wish my daddy didn’t drink.

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## **Section II: 9 Key Concepts to Share With a Child**

### **(Facts Supporting These Concepts Follow in Section III)**

**1. When a person drinks too much alcohol, it changes how their brain works.** Alcohol is one of the ingredients (things) in drinks with names like beer and wine and vodka and whisky and tequila – even in drinks with names like champagne and margarita.

These brain changes can make that person act differently or say mean things or start fights or stumble when they walk or slur their words or not remember what happened last night. It is the alcohol interrupting how the brain normally works, NOT the child, nor anyone else in the family, that causes a person who drinks too much to behave the way they do.

**2. Some people drink too much alcohol once in a while, and some people drink too much most of the time.** Either way, when a person drinks too much alcohol, brain changes can cause them to engage in drinking behaviors. See Key Fact #1 for a description of drinking behaviors.

**3. When someone in a family drinks too much alcohol, their drinking behaviors cause *secondhand drinking* impacts for others.** Secondhand drinking can cause other family members to also act differently, as each family member reacts to the person's drinking behaviors, as well as to each other's reactions to those drinking behaviors. [Revisit Rachael and her family for examples.] See Key Fact #4 for a description of secondhand drinking impacts.

A big part of the problem is that no one talks about what is going on – both the drinking and the secondhand drinking – in a productive manner. Yes, there is a lot of yelling and screaming and angry exchanges, but rarely do conversations occur when everyone is sober, calm and clearly stating the problem, suggesting solutions and coming to an agreement. This is often because family members (including the drinker) don't understand why a person drinks too much and does and says the things they do and say. This confusion leaves everyone trying to interpret what they think is going on. And, it can leave family members (including the drinker) feeling scared, angry, embarrassed or confused, or pretending they are okay or that someone or something else is the problem.

Understanding the information presented in these remaining pages, yourself, and helping children to understand it, as well, can go a long way to making conversations more productive.

**4. There are millions of children like Rachel.** In America, for example, one in four children live in a family with alcohol abuse or alcoholism before age 18. Not only is it imperative to help these children understand the information shared in this booklet and that they are not alone - for their own sakes - but it will help the children – friends, fellow students, cousins – within their sphere of influence, as well. Recall how Jackie, Rachael's friend, felt.

**5. Helping young children “see” what heavy drinking looks like (see Key Fact #3) can help them better understand** when to ignore in their hearts and minds the hurtful words or mean actions of a loved one who is drinking heavily because they will better understand that it is the alcohol in the brain that is causing the changed behaviors, not them (the child). This will also help them understand they have no control over another person’s thoughts and behaviors because those are controlled by that person’s brain – even their mommy’s, as in Rachael’s case. Thus the only thing a child can do is learn to control their own thoughts (their own brains), which is what gives them the control over their behaviors and their lives.

**6. Let the child talk about all of his or her feelings.** Don’t minimize their feelings or tell them it’s not that bad or that it could be worse or that they should know daddy (or mommy or \_\_\_\_\_) loves them. Just let them talk. If the child does not feel safe to talk in their home, talk to a professional – someone trained in substance abuse and addiction – who can help you with how to handle the situation.

**7. If you are the co-parent, keep a routine and ask what they need to feel safe.** Because things can be chaotic in a home with someone whose behaviors change as a result of drinking (and the behaviors of others in the family change as a result of secondhand drinking), it’s important to stick to routines: bedtime, meal time, homework time, baths and teeth brushing, story time, family breakfast (if dinner is too uncertain), helping with chores and the like. The routine helps them feel a sense of order and control.

As for feeling safe, children don’t know what to do when the yelling starts or a parent picks them up from school, clearly drunk. Talk to the child and ask them what they need to feel safe and then make sure that happens. I will be writing a follow-up booklet, “Talking to Rachael About Safety When Daddy Drinks,” to help with some of the more difficult safety conversations – especially when the drinking pattern is alcoholism.

**8. Don’t forget the fun.** Set aside time to just have fun, a time when none of this is talked about and the person who drinks too much is not in the group. This can be a walk, a trip to the library, sharing an ice cream cone – anything the child enjoys.

**9. Bottom line – make sure the child understands:**

- They are not alone.
- They are not responsible nor are they the cause of daddy’s drinking nor mommy’s or brother’s or sister’s reactions.
- The only brain any of us can control is our own; this means the only thoughts and behaviors we can control are our own.
- That you will be there to talk with them, to help them so that things feel less scary.

### **Section III: 5 Key Facts About Alcohol Abuse, Alcoholism and Secondhand Drinking**

**1. Drinking too much alcohol changes the way the brain works, which in turn causes drinking behaviors.** Drinking too much includes drinking patterns known as binge drinking, heavy social drinking, alcohol abuse and alcoholism. Drinking behaviors include:

- Verbally, physically or emotionally abusing someone – often a spouse, girlfriend, sibling boyfriend or child
- Doing poorly at work or school because of the drinking or recovering from the drinking
- Fighting with loved ones about the drinking
- Experiencing blackouts where they don't remember what they said or did when they were drinking
- Being inconsistent in one's behaviors (more loving or solicitous or more offensive and nit-picking than when not drinking, as examples); pursuing insane, circular arguments or trains of illogical thought
- Having unplanned, unwanted or unprotected sex; date rape
- Being admitted to the emergency room with a high Blood Alcohol Content (BAC), in addition to the emergency, e.g., broken arm, fell down the stairs, auto accident
- Driving while under the influence; getting a DUI (DWI); riding in a car driven by someone who has been drinking. [Speaking of getting a DUI, check out this short video, ["DUI: Is it a Choice or an Accident?"](#)]

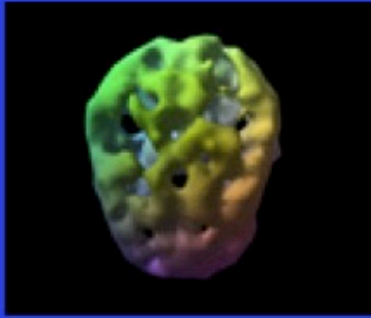
So why / how does alcohol affect the brain? Two reasons:

- It interrupts neural networks in the brain – the brain's communication system. Please read ["Here's to Neural Networks and Neurotransmitters: Keys to Brain and Therefore Emotional | Physical Health"](#)
- If it's more than the liver can process, it "sits" in the brain. It takes the liver an average of one hour to rid the body of the alcohol in one standard drink (see Key Fact #3). Please read ["Understand How the Body Processes Alcohol – Reduce Secondhand Drinking"](#)

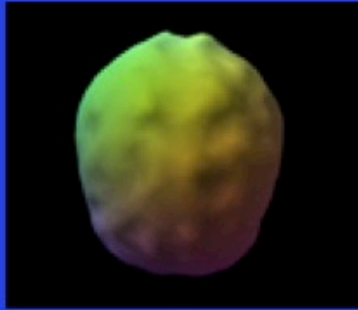
See Image next page showing brain changes caused by alcohol misuse. This is not the brain of an alcoholic, by the way. It's equally important to understand the brain can change / heal when substance abuse is stopped. Please read ["Alcohol | Drug Abuse and Addiction – Diagnosing With the Help of SPECT"](#) — about halfway down you'll find "Alcohol and Drug Abuse – Healing the Brain."



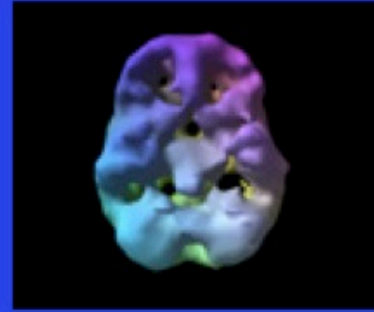
## 38 year old with 17 years heavy week-end use



Top-Down



Normal Brain



Underside

Source: SURFACE SPECTS, Courtesy Amen Clinics, [www.amenclinics.com](http://www.amenclinics.com)

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**What knowing this can do...** It can help a child understand that when a person drinks too much, the alcohol “sits” in their brains while it waits to be metabolized by their liver. Because the brain controls EVERYTHING we think, feel, say and do, that “sitting” interferes with how their brain works. It gets in the way of that person’s ability to act normally and make good decisions. It can cause that person to do things they would not normally do, such as: driving with the kids in the car after drinking, starting fights with friends or yelling at family members. Those “things” are known as drinking behaviors. Because alcohol is not digested like other foods and liquids, you cannot get rid of the effects of too much alcohol by throwing up or taking a walk or drinking coffee or taking a cold shower. The only thing that can make the effects of the alcohol go away is time – the time it takes the liver to metabolize and rid the body of the alcohol in each drink.

[Note: It can take more or less than one hour for the liver to metabolize one standard drink. How long depends on a number of factors, such as weight, stress, gender, medications, tolerance, stage of brain development, lack of sleep, amount of food eaten and how quickly the alcohol is consumed. But the general rule of thumb is that it takes one hour for one standard drink.]

**2. A person does not have to be an alcoholic to behave differently when they drink too much alcohol.** We tend to think of drinking as either normal or alcoholic and spend a lot of time trying to excuse drinking behaviors because we are afraid of the label, “alcoholic.” But there are

actually three stages of drinking, and within each stage, a range. These stages are: alcohol use, alcohol abuse and alcohol dependence (aka alcoholism). Check out this post with accompanying short video, [“Alcoholism is a Disease, and It’s Not Alcohol Abuse”](#)

Alcohol use – aka normal drinking or “low-risk” drinking is defined as:

For women: no more than 7 standard drinks in a week with no more than 3 of the 7 on any one day.

For men: no more than 14 standard drinks in a week with no more than 4 of the 14 on any one day.

See Key Fact #3 for the definition of a standard drink.

The earlier a person addresses their alcohol misuse (any drinking pattern beyond alcohol use or normal drinking), the better it is for brain health and those in their family. It is possible for a person who abuses alcohol to reduce how much they drink and thereby stop their drinking behaviors. It is not possible for a person with alcoholism to drink any amount of alcohol because they have the brain disease of addiction (in this case, an addiction to alcohol). Alcoholism can be successfully treated. For more information on this, see Key Resources on page 14.

***What knowing this can do...*** It can help a child understand that the label doesn’t matter; brain changes, and therefore drinking behaviors, occur with both alcohol abuse and alcoholism. It can also happen with one episode of binge drinking, which is defined as 4 or more standard drinks for a woman on an occasion and five or more for a man. It can also help a child understand that if a person is an alcoholic and thinks they can control how much they drink, they are mistaken because of the characteristics of their brain disease (loss of control, physical dependence, tolerance and cravings). They must stop drinking all together. Lastly, it can help you appreciate why it is so important to talk to children. Simply by virtue of being born to and/or living with a family member who drinks too much alcohol exposes a child to developing three of the five key risk factors: childhood trauma, social environment and genetics, *before they even have a first drink*. To understand why these are Key Risk Factors, please read [“Why Do Some People Become Addicted?”](#) Additionally, depending on how bad the SHD experiences are, a child may develop a fourth key risk factor, mental illness (depression and anxiety, for example). As an FYI, early use (alcohol misuse ages 12 -21) is the fifth key risk factor.

**3. All drinks are not the same, nor is binge drinking “normal” drinking.** The image below shows what a “standard drink” looks like. Each glass contains the same amount of alcohol – not liquid, but alcohol. L to R: 5 ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of whiskey, 1.5 ounce shot of vodka, 1.5 ounces of vodka on the rocks, 3.3 ounces of champagne and 12 ounces of regular beer.

This means that different shaped glasses and different drinks served in bars and restaurants and at people’s parties will hold different numbers of standard drinks. For example, a 24-ounce can of regular beer contains two standard drinks and a margarita could contain three.



Courtesy Jessica Scott

***What knowing this can do...*** A child can watch people who drink and count (or estimate) how many drinks they have had. When a woman has more than three or a man more than four, the child will know their brain is being affected by the amount of alcohol they have had to drink. (Note: The brain can also be affected by fewer than 3 or 4 drinks for all of the reasons noted in Key Fact #1.)

Because the brain controls EVERYTHING we think, feel, say and do, a child will also know that the alcohol “sitting” in their brain waiting to be metabolized by their liver is what makes that person say and do things they just wouldn’t normally say or do. For a child, this means knowing when to ignore that person’s hurtful words and/or avoid riding in a car with them driving, for example.

Actually doing these kinds of things will be much more complicated and will take working with a child to help them develop the tools they will need. This will be the subject of my next booklet, “Talking to Rachael About Safety When Daddy Drinks.”

**4. A person who drinks too much causes secondhand drinking impacts for others.** Often when a person drinks more than their brain and body can process, they say and/or do things that are hurtful to others, like yelling, blaming, driving a car after drinking, saying mean things, getting so drunk a friend has to take care of them and/or doing other kinds of risky behaviors. In other words, their drinking behaviors are having an impact on other people. Secondhand drinking impacts include:

- Being on the receiving end of the negative drinking behaviors described in Key Fact #1 and experiencing feelings of confusion, anger, sadness, embarrassment, fear, loneliness and the like
- Developing anxiety and depression, chronic stress
- Physical ailments, such as migraines, headaches, joint pain, stomach problems
- Difficulties forming healthy relationships



- Problems at work or school, such as an inability to concentrate
- Having to live on less money because the drinker keeps missing work and losing wages due to his/her drinking
- Having to do all of the family driving because the drinker lost their driver's license and then having to forgo a planned vacation because the money was needed to pay the DUI (DWI) fines and legal costs
- Having to live with the fall-out of what happens if the drinker kills or injures someone while driving under the influence
- Believing you are not important enough to the drinker for them to want to stop

Secondhand drinking, in turn, can cause people – especially spouses and children – to develop unhealthy coping skills in order to deal with the secondhand drinking and the feelings it causes. For more on this, please read [“The Health Consequences of Secondhand Drinking”](#). Also, this link from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, [“Children of Alcoholics,”](#) is helpful. [Note: the one in five figure does not include children living with alcohol abuse.]

***What knowing this can do...*** Understanding that a person's drinking behaviors are caused by the impact of alcohol on their brain and NOT by anything A CHILD says or does can be very helpful. The child won't be as affected by secondhand drinking; s/he won't be as confused by the drinker's mean, hurtful words or get into a car with them driving. S/he won't try to argue with them or get them to see their side of the discussion when they have been drinking. Additionally, a child will better understand that love, like all emotions, occurs in the brain, not the heart, which is why when a person drinks too much, their drinking behaviors make it seem as if they don't love them – or at least love them enough to stop, when in reality, it is the alcohol's impact on their brains that gets in the way.

**5. There are things a child can do to help themselves – to protect themselves from secondhand drinking impacts.** Check out this link, [“Coping With an Alcoholic Parent, What Can I Do?”](#) Explore the information at this link: National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA) [“Just 4 Kids”](#)

***What knowing this can do...*** it can help a child start to gather the tools they need to stay safe and protect themselves from the emotional and physical impacts of secondhand drinking. Please read, [“Coping With Secondhand Drinking | Drugging as a Young Person Can Cause a Young Person to Wire Unhealthy Coping Skills.”](#)

## **Section IV: Key Resources**

### **To Anonymously Assess Someone Else's Drinking**

Sometimes it helps to know what you – therefore your child – is/are dealing with, and that is what the following assessments can do:

- The United States National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) has designed a website to help people anonymously assess their (or someone else's) drinking and to provide suggestions for cutting down. Visit [www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov)
- The World Health Organization's (WHO) Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) is a 10 question questionnaire to help you identify a loved one's (or your) drinking patterns as either use, abuse or dependence. Visit [AUDIT \(the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test\)](#)

### **To learn more:**

The following are a few of the many resources now available:

- About addiction and alcoholism, visit [www.hbo.com/addiction](http://www.hbo.com/addiction)
- About alcohol related issues, secondhand drinking and impacts on families, visit [www.BreakingTheCycles.com](http://www.BreakingTheCycles.com)
- On what it takes for a person's drinking to get out of control, short eBook, [Crossing The Line From Alcohol Use to Abuse to Dependence: Debunking Myths About Drinking That Can Cause a Person to Cross The Line](#)

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### **About the Author**

Lisa Frederiksen is the author of nine books and a national keynote speaker. She has been consulting, researching, writing and speaking on substance abuse, addiction, treatment, mental illness, underage drinking | drug use/abuse, secondhand drinking and help for the family since 2003. Her 40+ years experience with family and friends' alcohol abuse and alcoholism, her own therapy and recovery work around those experiences, and her research for her blog posts and books, including [Crossing the Line From Alcohol Use to Abuse to Dependence](#), [If You Loved Me, You'd Stop!](#) and [Loved One In Treatment? Now What!](#) frame her work.

For more information, please visit her website, [www.BreakingTheCycles.com](http://www.BreakingTheCycles.com) or follow BreakingTheCycles.com on [Facebook](#) for daily updates.