

## **DUI cure: It's about treating the addiction**

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Most people don't like the idea of addiction. Despite being classified as a legitimate illness by the American Medical Society in 1956, it still implies a personal weakness, something that can't afflict the strong. Addiction, particularly to alcohol, continues to be perceived as it was for millennia pre-dating the modern era: as a moral failing on the part of the sufferer; it's their fault. Combine the words "alcohol" and "addict" and you get "alcoholic."

Our cultural instinct is usually to judge, blame and punish those who over-imbibe, in an effort to control the apparently irrational. We assume they will stop when the emotional and social consequences are too high.

However, the mental ability to envision the consequences of drinking too much, for example killing teenagers on the road, so present in the non-addicted, is absent in others.

Psychologically, addictive disorders are characterized by a mental loss of control; willpower becomes irrelevant as the brain succumbs to chemical dependency and intentions no longer guide actions.

This is as baffling to the addict as it is to those around them and everyone starts making excuses in an effort to understand.

Punishment proves futile and desperation mounts. Daily behavior for the addicted increasingly centers around using and recovering from the effects of the substance.

And perhaps most painfully, once addicted, use continues unabated even in the face of the most serious consequences such as conviction for driving under the influence.

When my students and I surveyed 201 incarcerated felony drunk drivers in prisons and programs across Montana last December, 94 percent self-identified as alcohol dependent; research studies confirm this is likely correct.

These offenders said that preventing repeat offenses requires treatment, not punishment, and advised mandatory residential treatment after the third - some even said second - DUI offense.

With an estimated average of 1,600 lifetime DUI events, they said this is necessary to interrupt the addictive process, to change their attitudes, outlooks and belief systems, to achieve sobriety and hence, to interrupt a life history of habitual drinking and driving that generally started between the ages of 16 and 20.

It should be very clear to judges, legislators, lawyers and other that you cannot punish an alcoholic into sobriety. Ability to envision the social and legal consequences of drinking is pathologically compromised.