

Blackouts

What is a blackout?

People often confuse the word “blackout” with passing out. These are two different things. A drinker can pass out (go unconscious) from drinking too much alcohol in a short period of time. A drinker can even pass out during a blackout.

A blackout, however, is a period of amnesia. It can take place over minutes, hours, or even days in which the drinker is awake and active but later remembers nothing. During a blackout the drinker may or may not appear drunk to others.

If you have experienced a blackout, you remained conscious and may have participated in emotionally charged events—as well as more mundane events—that later you cannot remember. During a blackout some people have driven a car, walked a dog, and gotten ready for bed—all without any memory of having done any of those things.

A blackout is not forgetting what happened. A blackout involves not being able to remember what happened. This is because during these periods of amnesia, the drinker’s brain is not always able to form new memories.

Studies have found that the occurrence of blackouts is a powerful indicator of alcoholism.

What causes a blackout?

No one knows exactly how or why blackouts happen. What is known is that heavy drinking and/or alcoholism can cause a blackout. In fact, blackouts are a worldwide standard symptom of early-stage alcoholism. In general, a blood alcohol level (BAL) of .20 percent is enough to trigger a blackout. This seems like a large amount. But lesser amounts of alcohol, such as three or four ounces of hard liquor, might be enough to produce a blackout in some drinkers. Alcohol and antidepressants taken together can also produce a blackout.

What are the negative consequences of a blackout?

Many alcoholics come out of a blackout to discover a wrecked car, an untended house, or bruises on their body. Some have come out of a blackout and found that they had hurt others or even committed a murder.

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Blackouts can aid the denial that alcoholics already experience. During a blackout drinkers can't remember what happened, so they don't have to immediately deal with the consequences of their actions. Even when others describe their blackout behavior in detail, they may still remain in denial, claiming that the described behaviors are untrue or exaggerated.

Alcoholics' denial is further assisted by blackouts because, thanks to this temporary amnesia, they often remember only the good, fun parts of being intoxicated and have no memory of how badly they behaved. To them, it's as if the blackout never happened. That space of time is an empty chalkboard.