

The depressed alcoholic. Clinical features and medical management.

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A relationship between depression and alcoholism has long been postulated. A review of prior research studies reveals that though patients with depression do not appear to develop alcoholism to any great extent, recently detoxified alcoholics have a depressive syndrome about 20% of the time. This cannot be accounted for readily from data on family studies or genetic studies, which generally suggest that alcoholism and depression are two independent illnesses, albeit both quite common. Clinically, depressed alcoholics resemble alcoholics more than they resemble depressives. The clinical course of depression when it coexists with alcoholism is generally benign and self-limited, with most patients becoming euthymic over the course of 2-4 weeks without specific antidepressant treatment. In some depressed alcoholics, however, a more chronic depression persists, and may predict a worse outcome for the alcoholism. Treatment of depression in alcoholics should be initially conservative. Tricyclic and other antidepressants should be used with extreme care as they may potentiate toxic effects of alcohol.