



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2004

I5 Blackouts: An Update — Causes and Consequences

Donal F. Sweeney, MD, 1170 High Road, PO Box 3276, Santa Barbara, CA 93108*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the causes, results, and consequences of the severe memory disruption of the Alcoholic Blackout, along with suggestions on dealing with it.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by discussing a blackout which is not well defined by those involved medically. A clear and agreed-on understanding of the causes of this memory disruption and its consequences is needed by the Forensic Community. Knowing what it is will help to avoid and prevent it and to deal with a person in a blackout until it passes. This is the purpose of this presentation.

I presented at the February 1990 AAFS Annual Meeting a talk outlining new knowledge and forensic implications of the Alcoholic Blackout. Since, in the past 14 years, I have closely surveyed the progress, new knowledge and changes in the thinking – from the multiple scientific disciplines involved. These include neuroscience and memory research, addiction medicine, psychiatry, psychology, neurology, brain imaging, anesthesiology, and some legal cases. Books, journals, papers, patient stories, and the Internet, were some of the sources used. Long thought to be common only in alcoholics, blackouts are now known to occur in moderate, weekend, and even naïve drinkers. College binge drinking is felt by some to have as high as a 25% incidence. How alcohol can disrupt the brain's memory system and the consequences of that disruption will be presented. With the current knowledge - the opportunity to avoid or prevent the blackout, suspect it in a drinker, and suggested care of that person until the blackout ends – is now possible. Slides, handouts, references, and other source material will be available.

Amnesia, Blackout, Consciousness