FACING LOSS OF CONTROL: 
THE KEY TO COUNSELING AN ALCOHOLIC

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I am a clergyman, and I am a chemically dependent person. I have had addictive experience both with alcohol and such sedative drugs as barbiturates and minor tranquilizers. I have been free from drugs for a little more than five years. During the last four years I have worked professionally in the chemical dependencies field.

In other words, I have put in my time on both sides of the fence. And I believe my addictive experience gives me some advantage when discussing alcoholism and related dependencies. Though non–alcoholics working in the field of drug abuse don’t want to admit their difficulties in identifying and empathizing with alcoholics, these professionals, in my experience, often miss that key experience through which addiction must ultimately be probed and treated: Loss of control. First of all, therefore, I want to describe the nature of that experience, and secondly I want to suggest how clergy may use the experience to assist the chemically dependent toward recovery.

John Keller, Administrative Director of the Rehabilitation Center, Lutheran General Hospital, Park Ridge, Illinois, describes the experience in this way:

The alcoholic initially loses control over the amount that he drinks. He can’t predict what will happen after he takes the first drink. . . . As the alcoholism progresses he will also lose control over the time when he drinks and thus drink when he doesn’t plan to drink. He reaches the point where he literally can’t keep from drinking or control the amount he drinks.¹

The addict really needs no one to define or explain the experience to him. Addicts simply discover, usually to their horror, that they have fallen victim to the drugs they use. A substance they once controlled now controls them and their lives. If they once had healthy dependencies on other human beings, social and community institutions, or God, now they depend entirely on their mood–altering chemicals.

¹ John Keller, Ministering to the Alcoholic (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1966), p. 27.