

# NEBRASKA LICENSEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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## STAGES OF ALCOHOL/SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Elvin Morton Jellinek, or E. M. Jellinek as he is most commonly known, was a biostatistician and physiologist who conducted extensive research on alcoholism. He was the first to conceptualize alcoholism as a disease, and shared his analysis of alcoholism in his book *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism* in 1960. Although his book is almost sixty years old, alcoholism, and other substance use disorders, are still considered a disease. Jellinek defined four developmental stages that a person goes through as they progress to an addiction to alcohol. These stages can be expanded to include any mood-altering substance. An understanding of these stages and recognition of corresponding signs and symptoms can help identify a substance use disorder. Following are Jellinek's four stages:

### Pre-Alcoholic Stage

At the beginning of this stage, there is little to no evidence that alcohol use is problematic as it is typically social and controlled. As the stage progresses, alcohol is used for stress reduction in greater frequency. In addition, tolerance begins to develop and the person may be using alcohol/substances to cope.

### Early Stage

This stage typically begins with a person's first blackout. Although there is a growing discomfort with alcohol use, there is an inability to resist alcohol. Friends and family may not be aware that alcohol use is becoming problematic. Some signs of this stage are as follows:

- Use of other's prescription medication
- Hides alcohol/substance supply
- Growing need for a drink in times of stress
- Uncomfortable in situations without alcohol/substances
- Drinks or ingests substances before or after social occasions
- Growing preoccupation with alcohol/substances
- Projects blame for drinking/substance use on to others

### Middle Stage

By the time a person has reached the middle stage, family and friends are aware of the alcohol/substance use. Once in this stage, it is impossible to stop drinking after one drink or after one use of a substance. Some signs in this stage are as follows:

- Drinking or using substances at inappropriate times such as at work or caring for your children.
- You begin to experience job, family, and/or legal problems.
- You display grandiose or aggressive behavior.
- You are unable to stop drinking/using despite several attempts to do so.

### Late Stage

This stage is characterized by all day drinking signifying that drinking or substance use is a priority over family and friends; the person is using at all costs. Signs at this stage include:

- Tremors/ shakes and/or hallucinations
- Impaired thinking
- Early morning drinking/substance use
- Physical health issues such as cirrhosis of the liver, dementia
- Loss of job, family, and friends
- Paranoia

If left untreated, life threatening problems will occur and it will eventually be fatal. Fatality may happen through accidents, medical illnesses related to substance use, accidental overdoses, and suicide. Alcohol/substance use can be treated at any of the above stages through treatment and a healthy recovery program

*If you are a licensed health or health-related service professional wanting more information about sobriety and recovery, please contact the NE LAP at (800) 851-2336 or (402) 354-8055 or visit our web site at [www.lapne.org](http://www.lapne.org). If you would like to consult with the NE LAP, or schedule an assessment or an educational presentation, please ask for Michelle Hruska, NE LAP Coordinator, or Nicole Winkler, NE LAP Counselor.  
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