Women and Addiction: Gender Differences that Impact Identification, Treatment, and Recovery

While addiction to alcohol and other drugs is an equal opportunity disease, women are affected differently than men. Compared to men, most women progress faster in addiction, face unique barriers to getting help, and recover differently.

Recognizing these differences can be critical in identifying addiction and determining the most effective treatment options. Six key considerations are discussed below.

1. The reported incidence of addiction among women is rising.

Historically, men have had a higher reported incidence of substance abuse and dependence, but women are beginning to close that gap. Young women, in particular, have an almost equal percentage of abuse and dependence concerns as do young men. Until recently, it was common for a woman to be diagnosed with a medical condition or mental health concern without being asked about her drinking or drug use. Or, if asked, she may have denied the problem. Today, addiction is more readily identified and directly addressed.

2. Women progress faster in addiction than men do.

Physiological differences accelerate the progression of addiction in women compared with men. The female body processes alcohol, and to varying extents other addictive substances, differently than does the male body. Women have less of the stomach enzyme that breaks down alcohol. This leads to greater blood alcohol concentration. Women also tend to have more fatty tissue than men, so alcohol is absorbed better into the bloodstream. One drink for a woman can have twice the physical impact as one drink for a man, exposing the brain and other organs to higher concentrations of blood alcohol for longer periods of time.

3. Women face different barriers to getting help than men do.

The stigma attached to addiction can be stronger for women—mothers, in particular—than it is for men. Denial, fear, and shame prevent women from looking honestly at their drinking and drug use, asking friends or family for help, or consulting a professional. Other common barriers to help for women include child care responsibilities, lower wages/less income, substance abuse by a partner or other family members, fear of losing custody of children, lack of access to resources, or feeling unworthy of help.

Relationships matter.
“Women are wired for relationships, and their recovery from addiction is all about connection. Much of the healing process revolves around connecting with others who share the struggle.”

—Brenda J. Iliff, MA
Executive Director at Hazelden in Naples and author of “A Woman’s Guide to Recovery”
4. Treatment options should address gender-specific issues.

Gender-specific programs can be beneficial for some women. Other women may simply need programming that is sensitive to gender issues. Co-occurring mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety need to be sorted out for all people in treatment. Other issues that need to be assessed for their impact on addiction are relationships, eating disorders, food addiction, and trauma, as well as hormonal concerns. While none of these issues causes addiction they can be instrumental in prompting people to cross the line from substance abuse to addiction and also to relapse.


Powerful feelings of shame and guilt deter women from seeking help for addiction, even when their lives depend on it. So it’s important to work with addiction professionals who know how to get the client to be accountable without fault finding or judgment. The old “break-them-down-to-build-them-up” approach doesn’t work because many women already feel broken by the time they reach treatment. Instead, relationships are an important motivator for women in treatment. Women want to belong and feel connected with others.

6. Women recover from addiction differently than men do.

Recovery often happens more quickly for women than men. That’s because women are wired for relationships, and recovery from addiction starts with connection. Remember, addiction is an extremely isolating condition. Women lose themselves and their most important relationships to addiction. Much of the healing process of recovery revolves around connecting with others who share the struggle.

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