

Substance Abuse and its Effects on Families & Older Adults

Effects of Substance Use Disorders on the Family and the Benefits of Recovery



The stress triggered by substance use disorders can have physical, emotional, social, and spiritual consequences on individuals and their families. Specifically, a parental substance use disorder greatly affects his or her children. Children who grow up in this environment often experience feelings of guilt, shame, anger, or isolation throughout their lives. Additionally, parents with a family history of addiction may have trouble establishing healthy and productive habits within their own families.

If highly stressful family situations persist they can have an adverse impact on a child's development and dangerous health consequences for the family and friends of the person with the substance use disorder. This emotional stress can affect a person's mood, appetite, and sleep cycles. In addition, it may ultimately lead family members to develop chronic anxiety, depression, or their own substance use disorder. Creating communities that focus on the prevention of mental illness and substance abuse for children, youth, families, and other community members is one of SAMHSA's (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) 10 strategic Initiatives.

Fortunately, family therapy helps those affected by a loved one's addiction to identify and resolve their problems. Through education and guidance, participants learn they can't control their loved one's addiction, but they can take accountability for their own health. Family-oriented treatment programs and support groups are widely available and effective. In two recent surveys of individuals who had participated in family treatment programs:

- 82% reported much improved mental health and well-being.
- 73% reported a greater ability to function at home, school, or work.
- 68% of women who stayed in comprehensive treatment longer than 3 months were able to remain alcohol and drug free, compared with 48% who left treatment within the first 3 months and did not remain alcohol and drug free.



Prevalence and Effects of Substance Use Disorders Among Older Adults

Substance use disorders have become more prevalent among middle aged and older adults and continue to become a greater public health issue as the baby boomers reach retirement age. Among people ages 50 to 59, reported use of illicit drugs has nearly doubled since 2002.

Older adults are more sensitive to the effects of substance use as they age for the following reasons:

- Due to physiological changes associated with aging, 3 drinks may affect them more heavily than people in their early twenties.
- They may misuse substances both deliberately, due to increased stress and pain, and inadvertently by mixing medications or taking them with alcohol or for purposes not originally prescribed by a doctor.
- The medications they are taking and their general health affect how they respond to alcohol and drugs.

Many older adults experience addiction:

- 50% of those in assisted living homes have an alcohol problem.
- 26% of assisted living residents have misused prescription drugs.



Avoiding the misuse of alcohol and medications contributes to lower rates of illness and disability among older adults.

Medication Tips for Older Adults

- Keep track of what medications you take on a daily basis and when you take them.
- Ask your doctor if you can safely drink alcohol while taking your medication.
- Read and follow the directions for your medication. Be careful not to take more than the recommended dose.
- Talk to a friend, family member, or health care professional if you are concerned.
- Do not take medication for other purposes than intended.



Symptoms to Look for in Older Adults

Addiction in older adults may be difficult to detect when they live alone. Friends and family may not consider substance use problems as the issue, and may think that their loved one suffers from depression, memory or thinking problems, or anxiety. Look for symptoms such as slurred speech, poor hygiene and self-neglect, and unexplained nausea or vomiting. If these symptoms are present, encourage the person to seek help—or in some cases, you may need to broach the topic with the person's health care provider yourself.

Getting Help for an Older Adult

Use the following tips when speaking with older adults regarding specific addiction and treatment options:

- **Talk about your worries** about their substance use when they are lucid.
- **Share information** regarding the effects of alcohol and drugs on their health.
- **Ask to go to doctor's visits** with them or contact the doctor yourself, if appropriate.
- **Suggest** drug-free and alcohol-free activities.
- **Encourage counseling** and offer to drive them to and from these meetings.
- **Be supportive** and encourage them to make time for grandchildren, family gatherings, friends, and extracurricular activities.

How to Get Help for Yourself, Your Family, and Others

Family members and friends can find supplementary treatment and recovery information through the following resources:

- **SAMHSA's National Helpline**, accessed by calling 1-800-662-HELP, which provides 24-hour free and confidential information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish.
- **SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site**, which contains resources about mental health, substance abuse, and treatment.
- **Al-Anon/Alateen Family Groups** – Accessed at <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>, this Web site provides support groups for families and friends of people with alcohol problems.
- **Nar-Anon** – Accessed at <http://www.nar-anon.org>, this group provides a community for family members to share experiences related to substance use disorders.
- **National Association for Children of Alcoholics** – Accessed at <http://www.nacoa.org>, this organization provides information and educational materials for children and families of people with alcohol or drug problems, as well as for treatment professionals.
- **SAMHSA's "As You Age" Web site** – Accessed at <http://www.asyouage.samhsa.gov>, this SAMHSA-sponsored site provides information and resources on medications and alcohol misuse for older adults.
- **Eldercare Locator** – Accessed at <http://www.eldercare.gov> or 1-800-677-1116, this resource helps older individuals and their families access an array of home and community-based services.

For a more information or for a complete guide for families and older adults, please visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>, locate the "Recovery Month Kit," and click on the "Targeted Outreach" link. Information about treatment options and special services in your area can be found by calling 1-800-662-HELP or visiting <http://www.samhas.gov/treatment>.

**EDISON MUNICIPAL ALLIANCE/YOUTH SERVICES COMMISSION
732-248-7361**

EDISON DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES