



# Recovery Notes

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*Scientific Recovery*

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For Problems with Alcohol

OUTPATIENT TREATMENT FOR HIGH-PROFILE WOMEN

2009 • ISSUE 1

## Women, Stress & Alcohol

*For women predisposed to alcohol problems, distinctive kinds of stress have been identified as significant risk factors for problem drinking. Two of the most important are chronic stress and traumatic stress.*



### CHRONIC STRESS

Persistent stress stemming from a problem situation, in which a woman feels trapped, with no hope of resolution, can be exceptionally difficult. Unremitting stress that grinds away and wears a woman down day after day, month after month, destroys bodies, minds, hearts, and lives.

Dysfunctional families, unhappy marriages, or problem jobs and careers are some of the sources of chronic stress that can give rise to alcohol problems. For example, women who have trouble with their closest relationships tend to drink more than other women. Drinking may serve as a way for a woman to tolerate an objectionable relationship or to alter herself to make a relationship work. The relentless dissatisfaction of an unwanted status – being retired or unemployed when you would like to be working, single when you want to be married, married when you would like to be divorced, or childless when you want to be a parent – also puts a woman at

risk for drinking problems. Among older women, stressors such as children leaving home, the death of a spouse or partner, financial worries, or illness can precipitate problem drinking.

One of the reasons that women drink is to help them cope with chronic stress. Women may turn to alcohol in an attempt to self-medicate a painful loss, loneliness, or depression or to suppress feelings that are deemed unacceptable. Whether a woman uses alcohol to relieve stress is influenced by many factors such as her past drinking habits, her expectations about the effect of alcohol on stress, her family history, and the drinking habits of her partner. For women, depression is closely linked to heavy drinking. While drinking alcohol may help to relieve emotional suffering in the short term, alcohol is a depressant that aggravates depressive symptoms over time. So, any benefits experienced are temporary, and eventually distress intensifies.

### TRAUMATIC STRESS

Trauma is an extremely stressful event and usually refers to a terrifying incident or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Even seeing someone else physically hurt is traumatic. About half of American women endure trauma during their lifetime, usually in the form of suffering in a natural disaster, being physically or sexually abused as a child, or seeing others hurt. Women who were chronically traumatized or neglected as children, or who have been exposed to a tragic, horrifying event as adults, may develop an anxiety disorder known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The symptoms of PTSD can include re-experience of the trauma; emotional numbness; avoidance of people, places and thoughts connected to the terrifying event; trouble sleeping; and an exaggerated startle response. Untreated, PTSD can endure for decades.

PTSD is an emotional disorder known to be common among women with alcohol problems.

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Because in most cases excessive drinking begins after the exposure to trauma and the development of PTSD, this disorder is considered a risk factor for problem drinking. Alcohol may be used to help to wash away memories, increase social confidence, or induce sleep; but, in the long run, it brings about more problems than it relieves.

### RELATIONSHIPS: KEY TO PREVENTION

There is no absolute way to prevent alcohol problems. However, strong family support and solid relationships with non-drinking friends can help. Among adult women, close, personal ties and

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support from a friend are especially protective. When a woman is able to open her heart and talk intimately with another person, something helpful occurs. Women who report having a single confidante over a long stretch of time – even women predisposed to alcoholism by a range of high-risk factors – are less likely to develop alcohol problems. If a woman is grounded in a sustaining relationship, she is not as vulnerable to alcohol's appeal because she feels less alone, feels supported and understood, and can receive concrete help with life's problems.

A relationship with a treatment professional is often very helpful for both chronic stress and PTSD. Talking with a therapist can unlock fresh perspectives and reveal new angles for resolving the knotty problems that are the source of chronic stress. As well, women suffering the intense physical and emotional responses of PTSD can find relief and healing in a therapeutic relationship where they can talk with a sense of safety about their experiences and feelings.

Finally, a woman can develop a more positive caretaking relationship with herself and seek out constructive strategies for stress reduction in her daily life. Purposely using stress reduction methods that avoid alcohol can strengthen positive coping without the long-term problems caused by drinking.

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### Relationships: Key to Prevention

- Make regular time for friends and family. Choose pleasurable things to do with them. Often the activity is less important than the opportunity to talk and listen to another person.
- Cultivate friendships with non-drinkers and take part in activities that exclude drinking.
- Nurture a relationship with a confidant for mutual understanding and support.
- Find a licensed therapist who can help you address the problems causing your stress.

### Constructive Coping

Additional protection is provided by positive coping strategies that don't involve alcohol. Do whatever it is you like to do or need to do to take care of yourself. When help with soothing a painful feeling or mood is needed, consider these possibilities.

- Take a warm bubble bath.
- Go to bed early and plan to make tomorrow a better day.
- Let yourself cry, alone or with a friend.
- Take a walk or do some vigorous exercise.
- Go to a beautiful, peaceful place.
- Talk to a sympathetic friend.
- Write in a journal.
- Dance.
- Watch a movie.
- Get a massage.
- Read a good book.

### What is Safe Drinking for Women?

Experts recommend no more than one drink per day for women. When women are drinking less often, no more than 3 drinks per occasion is recommended. These levels of drinking are usually not associated with health risks. A drink is defined as 12 grams of alcohol, which is:

- One 12 ounce bottle of beer
- One 5 ounce glass of wine
- 1.5 ounces of 80 proof distilled spirits

### What is Problem Drinking?

Drinking becomes a problem when it harms a woman's health, behavior, or relationships. The amount of alcohol that creates problems differs among women, depending on her genetic make-up; her age, weight, and health status; her family background; and her personal history.

### Warning Signs of a Drinking Problem:

- Drinking to relieve pain or stress
- Drinking to get drunk
- Planning activities around drinking
- Drinking more than intended
- Drinking after resolving not to drink
- A persistent desire to drink
- Thinking a lot about drinking
- Continuing to drink despite significant consequences
- Drinking alone when angry or sad

## Scientific Recovery

Scientific Recovery is an evidence-based treatment program for women seeking state-of-the-art, individual therapy for problem drinking. Our focus is on professional women who have recognized that alcohol is a problem they no longer want in their lives. Our goal is to assist women not only to eliminate their alcohol dependence, but also to be happy that they did.



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