



Recovery Notes

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Scientific Recovery

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For Problems with Alcohol

OUTPATIENT TREATMENT FOR HIGH-PROFILE WOMEN

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Women, Retirement and Alcohol

A woman's transition from work to retirement is usually driven by financial considerations. Often overlooked are the emotional and social vulnerabilities and unforeseen changes that surface after retirement. For women predisposed to alcohol problems, the emotional hazards of retirement are significant risk factors for problem drinking.

Problem drinking has reached epidemic proportions among older women. And, the incidence of alcohol problems among mature women continues to rise because of the sheer number of aging baby boomers. Research suggests that over 10% of mature women are drinking enough to put themselves at risk of the health problems alcohol can cause and are also at risk of alcohol addiction.

Studies suggest that, in contrast to men, a significant number of older women with alcohol problems begin drinking heavily later in life. These women are categorized as late-onset alcohol abusers, women for whom alcohol abuse is new. For the most part, these women are responding to the multiple losses of later life, a significant one of which is retirement from meaningful work.

FROM WORK TO RETIREMENT

In our society, work is more than a paycheck and more than the mental and physical tasks a woman performs while employed. For their working years, many women are defined by their jobs - from the moment they wake up to how they introduce themselves at parties. When a woman retires, she loses that identity. When a woman works, her day is shaped by the requirements of the job. But, when a woman retires, she alone plans her day and her week. There can be a major contrast between the familiar, well-defined world of work and the undefined roles and wide-open goals of retirement.

A job provides a woman not just with identity and structure. Women feel important and productive because of their work. A woman's occupation can be a powerful source of self-esteem, a personal lifestyle, a sense of purpose, a social network, and friendships. Deep personal fulfillment, rewarding challenges, creative expression, prestige, and power can be derived from a woman's profession. These non-financial benefits satisfy profound personal needs that don't evaporate simply because a woman is no longer employed.

FROM RETIREMENT TO PROBLEM DRINKING

Retirement brings abrupt and drastic changes to the lives of women who work. For women whose work has been a primary source of identity and has given their lives structure, purpose, and meaning, retirement brings multiple, sometimes unanticipated, losses. At first, retirement can feel like a vacation. The initial phase of retirement is often referred to as the "honeymoon" period. Women sleep in, catch up on reading, travel, and spend more time with family and friends.

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However, once this “honeymoon” period wears off, women begin to wonder, “Now, what do I do?”. The extraordinary shift in the everyday pattern of life is a major challenge. With the absence of the affirmation professional women get from their careers and with no one demanding their expertise anymore, retired women may lack meaningful sources of self-esteem. Disenchantment sets in. They may find retirement difficult to cope with and begin to feel bored, purposeless, isolated, lonely, and depressed.

Primary relationship issues can compound the losses of retirement. For women who are married or in a long-term relationship, patterns have developed about who manages the finances and who handles various domestic responsibilities. Retirement may disrupt these familiar roles. For a woman who does not share common interests with her partner, spending more time together in retirement may create relationship tension.

Being single both simplifies and complicates the adjustment to retirement. The single woman has only herself to look after and can make her own choices. On the other hand, she has no partner to share things with or to lean on emotionally.

Poor health in retirement can be a source of worry and stress and lead to a negative self-image for some women. Health problems can also limit mobility. Activities previously enjoyed may no longer be viable options; thereby producing increased isolation for a retiree.

Loss of relationships is a key feature of retirement. Children leave home, families are scattered, friends move away or die – the circle of relationships grows smaller. The death of a spouse is often devastating. The pain of grief, bereavement and loneliness can become unbearable.

ALCOHOL USE BECOMES A PROBLEM.

For some retired women, alcohol may seem like an easily available answer to a life filled with loss, pain and uncertainty. These retirees may turn to alcohol in an attempt to self-medicate their loneliness and depression. But, any benefits experienced are fleeting, and soon the distress deepens.

What is more, physiological changes that accompany aging substantially decrease a woman’s tolerance for alcohol and, as a result, older women become intoxicated very quickly. Prescribed medications and over-the-counter drugs can intensify the effects of alcohol, leading to even more rapid intoxication. Astonishingly, an older woman can develop the disease of alcoholism in a few months to a year.

No reason, whether grief, illness or loneliness justifies alcohol abuse or dependency. Alcohol is neither a healthy nor effective solution to the problems of retirement and aging. Unfortunately, older women are among the least likely group to

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ever seek out treatment help for their drinking. They report feelings of great embarrassment over having developed problems with alcohol, and these feelings of humiliation frequently deter them from asking for assistance with the problem. Additionally, many women are able to present a temporary façade of calm dignity that successfully disguises their private anguish.

Understandably, alcohol problems in retirement are frequently hidden and, consequently, easily unnoticed. Retired women often live alone and don’t have work-related problems caused by

alcohol abuse. Because they usually drink in the privacy of their homes, they are less likely to be disruptive in public or arrested for driving while intoxicated.

Many times, even when family, friends, and professionals recognize an alcohol problem they are reluctant to confront the older woman. This reluctance is often a result of misguided feelings of compassion for the older woman or related to a fear of making the retired woman angry. A lack of knowledge about the disease of alcoholism, especially as it arises in later life, may also discourage others from addressing the problem. Their own personal drinking habits or the older woman’s denial of her problematic drinking behavior contributes to a hesitancy to take up an obvious problem. In truth, when older women are spared the shame of acknowledging their alcohol abuse, their lives are shortened, their health ruined, and their quality of life significantly diminished. They are robbed of the opportunity to find constructive solutions to the difficult problems they face.

Retired women who are drinking too much deserve to be treated with respect and humanity. Older women usually do well in treatment for their problem drinking. They typically participate fully and honestly in therapy and have good treatment success and sobriety rates. Unfortunately, only a few who develop alcohol problems ever get a chance to have a good, sober life in retirement – a genuinely enjoyable and fulfilling retired life.

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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