

Vulnerable Seniors - Substance abuse among the Elderly

By Mel Higham

It's not something you often hear about, but the elderly of America are increasingly at risk of becoming addicts [1]. Our notion of seniors doesn't tend to fit with our viewpoint of addicts - I'm willing to bet that you raised an eyebrow at the first sentence - but the problem exists nonetheless, and is growing. The most common forms of addiction are



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alcoholism and painkiller dependency - both of which can be just as devastating for seniors as younger people.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes can be a major obstacle in all areas of drug rehabilitation [2], but it's particularly relevant when it comes to seniors. Typically seniors aren't what is pictured when we think about addicts. In fact, if asked to describe the stereotypical antithesis of an addict, a nice old lady is probably what you'd come up with. This kind of attitude frequently leads people to miss the warning signs of a growing substance dependency. It may even lead them to unwittingly encourage substance-abusing behaviors.

"Oh go on, Granny, have another glass of wine!" Well meaning people often encourage addictive behavior with the belief that they are not likely to be adding to an existing problem or it can't do their elderly loved one any real harm anyway. There is also a prevailing belief that seniors should be allowed to indulge their taste for alcohol, or pop an extra pain pill if they want to. The general attitude is that the elderly are old enough to have 'earned it'. There is also the misconception that the elderly are too old for an addiction to really damage to their lives.

For seniors themselves, there is an attitude that they don't have to worry too much about their bodies any longer, so indulging a bit really won't hurt them. Relying on a former self-image of living a sober lifestyle may cause some Elderly to miss the signs that an addiction has taken hold. The belief that they are not the kind of people who abuse substances makes it all the easier to 'let themselves go'^[3].

Loneliness and Boredom

As we age, many of us may find ourselves more isolated than we used to be. Too many seniors find themselves living excruciatingly lonely lives. Loneliness is incredibly bad for anyone's mental health, but it can be especially damaging to an older person who may need human stimulation to keep their mental faculties active. Coupled with grief, which often affects seniors as they lose friends and loved ones, the recipe for a slide into depression-related addiction is a potent one. Loneliness has been proven to have a strong association with alcoholism in many studies ^[4] - particularly when, as is often the case with retirees who live alone, it is coupled with an excess of free time and boredom. Grief and depression may also trigger comfort drinking, or encourage a growing reliance upon the emotional numbing effects of opioid painkillers.

Opportunity

Older people are a lot more likely to be on medication than younger people, which unfortunately gives them a lot more opportunity to become addicted to prescription drugs. Prescription drug addiction is an enormous problem within the United States, taking more lives on an annual basis than heroin and cocaine combined. Many of the painkillers prescribed to our seniors are opioids, just like heroin, or benzodiazepines, which affect the central nervous system. They're powerfully addictive, and a vast swathe of our population is currently in the grip of prescription drug dependency, to which many lose their lives ^[5].

Most addicts stumble accidentally into addiction, assuming that pills given to them by a doctor can't be bad. They often get hooked by upping their doses by increments in order to help them 'get by' on 'bad days'. In the case of seniors with cognitive impairment, a dependency can be developed by forgetting having taken the medication and accidentally repeating dosages. Alternatively, even non-addictive prescription medication can interact poorly with alcohol, thus contributing to other dependency issues. And the fact that the symptoms of addiction often mimic symptoms which we generally associate

with old age [6] and its related illnesses means that often these addictions are not recognized until it is too late.

What Can We Do?

So how can we help our ageing loved ones to steer clear of the addiction trap? If you have concerns about an elderly loved one's inclination towards addictive substances, keeping an eye on worrying behaviors is the best way to confirm any suspicions. One excellent way to help is to remove the burden of loneliness, boredom, and grief by providing emotional support, visiting regularly, and providing them with plenty of human stimulation. Keeping an eye on drinking habits and any medicines they're taking is also a good idea. Taking an interest in their health and emotional state can work wonders in preventing a problem from developing!

A home health Caregiver can also be an enormous boon in this situation. Not only will a medically trained Caregiver keep track of what your loved one is taking and when, they'll also be on hand to pick up on any worrying symptoms and trends within their lives.

Addictions can ruin a person's golden years - but good health, both physical and mental, will make the elder years a time of joy.

[1] American Osteopathic Association, "[Substance Abuse in Senior Citizens - A Serious Problem](#)"

[2] Bruno Gnanewarun, "[Shattering Society's Stereotypes Of Drug Users](#)", Concrete, Jan 2013

[3] Rita Milios, "[Seniors and Substance Abuse: The Invisible Epidemic](#)", [Recovery.org](#), Sept 2015

[4] Igemar Akerland, Jan Olof Hornquist, "[Loneliness and alcohol abuse: A review of evidences of an interplay](#)", Journal of Social Sciences and Medicine, Feb 1992

[5] Centers For Disease Control And Prevention, "[Injury Prevention And Control: Prescription Drug Overdose](#)"

[6] Medical News Today, "[All About Addiction](#)"



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Mel Higham is a writer and editor with a special interest in mental health and wellness. As a guest writer for HomeAid Health Care's Elder Topics, Mel brings her expertise to our audience.

HomeAid is sister company to Prairie Home Assisted Living which has served the physical, spiritual, mental and health needs of their residents since 1999. Together the two companies provide comprehensive care for the elderly in the Fox Valley area of Wisconsin.