

Psychology Today



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Sure Recovery

Does Gender Matter When It Comes to Addiction Recovery?

With gender addiction gap shrinking, women need gender-specific treatment.

Our country is in the middle of a drug epidemic, with addiction in women growing at a faster rate than men over the past several years. While addiction to alcohol and drugs among women overall is roughly half that of men, studies have shown the narrowing of the gender gap in addiction. According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, women addicted to heroin doubled between 2002 and 2013, twice the rate of increase among men.

I believe that many of these women slipped unknowingly into addiction, often with devastating consequences to their health and lifestyle. While anyone can become addicted, each person's experience is different. I have been treating women with addiction issues for over a decade and these are some reasons why gender matters when it comes to recovery:

Biology predisposes women to become addicted faster: A woman's body contains less water than men (which means drugs and alcohol in the system are less diluted), more fatty tissue (higher retention) and lower levels of specific enzymes (which leads to slower break down of substances). As a result, women can progress faster to addiction than men as their bodies are exposed to the substance longer and at higher concentration levels.

Childhood sexual abuse can be a factor: According to research by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), women who experienced any type of sexual abuse during their childhood were about three times more likely than those that weren't sexually abused to report drug and alcohol dependence as adults. While sexual abuse can happen to men or women, I often see with my female patients that childhood sexual abuse was a factor in their addiction.

More access to addictive medication acts as a gateway: Women are likely to seek medication or self-medicate for emotional and psychological issues. In my experience anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder and eating disorders more commonly affect women and provide them access to prescription medication that could be addictive.

Stress related to family responsibilities and body image [HYPERLINK "https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership"](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership) management lead to addictive **meds: Women are often a focal point of family logistics and oftentimes juggle a demanding career as well. Therefore, they are more prone to start using addictive medication to help them keep up the appearance of being able to juggle their careers and family responsibilities effortlessly. Women are also prone to using stimulants (cocaine, amphetamines) to suppress hunger or manage weight.**

Drug use sometimes helps bonding with partner: A boyfriend, spouse or other significant partner can introduce a woman to drugs and drug-use rituals like sharing needles. Drug use then becomes a way to cement these bonds.

I think it is much more difficult for women to make that first call for help, as they sometimes feel they might be abandoning their role in the family, and shame and fear are barriers to women seeking treatment.

I am aware of the issues women face when seeking and participating in treatment and. As the Co-Founder and Medical Director at the Center for Network Therapy, New Jersey's first outpatient detox facility, I have made sure that our Ambulatory Detox program is focused on a women's needs by:

Utilizing Decisional Balancing Exercise - evaluating the pros and cons of the decision to enter treatment and extrapolating the consequences of not entering treatment in order to ensure adherence to treatment and compliance.

Providing appropriate therapy and medication to address patient's psychological issues. This includes training staff to be sensitive to gender-specific issues such as hormonal concerns or trauma

Bringing immediate family into treatment and working on relationship issues the patient may be facing in their home environment.

Mitigating any logistical or scheduling problems the patient may face by building flexibility into the ambulatory detoxification program.

Coordinating care with primary care physician to ensure patient is receiving care for all health issues.

Incorporating self-help groups early in treatment as women are able to connect better to peers in support groups, which helps accelerate their recovery.

My goal is to ensure that the specific needs of women are addressed in the Ambulatory Detoxification program at the Center for Network Therapy. Individualized treatment protocols to

meet a patient's needs and utilization of a gender-responsive treatment approach, increase the chances of the patient staying on the path to recovery after detoxification.

For more information on substance abuse dependency, addiction and treatment, visit the Center for Network Therapy's website at recoveryCNT.com.

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Finding a Way Out of Addiction



Indra Cidambi, M.D., is the founder and medical director of the Center for Network Therapy (CNT), New Jersey's first state licensed Ambulatory (Outpatient) Detoxification care and treatment facility.

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