

## Women and Addiction: Special issues in treatment and recovery

Brenda Iliff, M.A., L.A.D.C.  
Clinical Director, Hazelden Women's Recovery Center  
Author, A Woman's Guide to Recovery Hazelden 2008

## Equal *AND* Different

- Get addicted differently
- Different reasons
- Progress Faster
- Recover Different
- Relapse Different

## Research

Only 8% of Substance Abuse research is about women's needs-Not much out there!



Jellinek Study – Historical  
Evidence Based Practices

## Addiction is Addiction!

- Great Equalizer
- Spiral Downward/Progressive
- Hiding and Sneaking
- Family and friends go down too
- Role central to stability of family (network)
- Neglect of Self
- Drug of Choice Concerns
- Stigma
- Chronic Pain

## Abuse and Dependence

Age	Females	Males
12-17	9%	9%
18-25	16%	26%
26-34	9%	17%
35-49	5%	12%
50+	1.5%	5%

(NSDUH Report: Gender Differences, 2004)

## The Female Brain

- Every brain begins as a female brain
- 8 weeks after conception testosterone kicks in - Male Brain
  - Shrinks communication center
  - Reduces hearing cortex
  - Makes the part of the brain that processes sex twice as large

The Female Brain, Louann Brizendine, 2006 Morgan Books

## Practical/Reality

- Woman uses about 20,000 words per day
- Man uses about 7,000 words per day
- Thoughts about sex enter woman's brain every so often, man's brain much more frequently
- Woman over 50 is more likely to initiate a divorce than a man

The Female Brain, Louann Brizendine, 2006 Morgan Books

- Recovery is a natural for women
  - Primary Motivation-Connection (Miller, 1976)
  - There is a Solution, [Alcoholics Anonymous, Chapter 2](#)

## Recovery is a Natural!



- A woman's primary motivation is to build a sense of connection with others (Miller, 1976)
- Recovery is about relationships
  - Self, others and a Higher Power
- Living alone, one can be at risk for relapse.
- Twelve Step programs are a natural for women.
  - non-hierarchical
  - spiritual
  - encourage relationships.
- Need to develop relationships with women where women are not seen as competition for men

## Women and Chemical Dependency Facts

- Addiction is not a single dimension issue for women
- Two things that most addicted women share
  - Lack of healthy relationships
  - Experience of Trauma

Helping Women Recover, Stephanie Covington

## Reasons for starting use (Relapse Concerns?)

- Boys
  - Recreational use
  - Like feeling-the effect of the drug
- Girls
  - Want to belong with their group
  - Don't want to hurt others feelings by not using

Straussner and Brown (2002). [The Handbook of Addiction Treatment for Women: Theory and Practice](#), New York: Jossey Bass. P 236.

## Girls-Start Using (Relapse Concerns?)

- Loose weight (Food/Body Concerns)
- Relieve stress or boredom (Complacency)
- Improve their mood (Mental Health)
- Reduce sexual inhibitions (Intimacy)
- Self-medicate depression (Mental Health)
- Increase confidence (Self-Esteem)

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). [Women under the Influence](#), John Hopkins University Press. 2006

## Physical Concerns

- Women's body contains less water and more fatty tissue-which increases alcohol absorption
- Lower activity level of enzyme called alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH) which breaks down alcohol
- Experience higher blood alcohol levels than men, drink for drink
- Become dependent after using cocaine for shorter amounts of time and in smaller doses than men yet cocaine affects their blood flow less

## ONE DRINK TWICE THE IMPACT!

“The impact of one drink on a girl is roughly equivalent to the impact of two drinks on a boy so girls who are keeping up with the boys are actually subjecting themselves to far worse consequences.”

Susan Foster, Director of Policy Research for the National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University

## Young Women

- Get hooked faster
- Get hooked using lesser amount of alcohol and other drugs
- Suffer consequences faster and more severely
- May delay onset of puberty
- Hurt chances of getting pregnant later
- Cause long lasting changes to brain as using during brain development

## Older Women

- Increased risk for breast cancer (alcohol increases estrogen)
- More vulnerable to cognitive function damage
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- Circulatory disorders
- Experience brain atrophy sooner than men
- Report more physical disabilities (stairs, walking, etc.)

## Barriers to Treatment

- Lack of child care
- Lack of safe child care
- Lack of children
- Lower wages – less money
- Role central to stability of family
- Can hide in less visible role at work
- Attendance problem – can blame sick child
- Don't see problem – think “crazy” “bad”
- Don't want treatment

## Major Areas of Focus in Treatment

- The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (1994) identifies seventeen critical areas of focus for women's treatment:
  - The causes of addiction, especially gender specific issues related to addiction (e.g., factors related to onset of addiction and social, physiological, and psychological consequences of addiction)
  - Low self-esteem
  - Race, ethnicity, and cultural issues
  - Gender discrimination and harassment
  - Disability-related issues

- Relationships with family members and significant others
- Attachments to unhealthy interpersonal relationships
- Interpersonal Violence
- Eating Disorders
- Sexuality-Functioning and Orientation
- Parenting
- Grief related to the loss of children, family members, partners, and/or alcohol and other drugs
- Work
- Appearance and overall health and hygiene
- Isolation related to lack of support systems
- Life-plan development
- Child care and child custody

## Relationships

- Women speak of drugs in terms of relationships
- Partners may introduce to drugs/be supplier
- Sex trade involvement?
- Children with partner who is unavailable, in jail.
- Experienced abuse?
- Use drugs to alter self for relationship?
- Relapse trigger?
- Historically related to dependence on men, including doctors?

Straussner and Brown (2002). *The Handbook of Addiction Treatment for Women: Theory and Practice*. New York: Jossey Bass. P 23.

## Parenting

- Abuse or neglect
- Mental health concerns
- Need to acknowledge – work thru denial and shame – Reporting?
- Child custody
- Develop parenting skills
- Put recovery first, but remember they are still a parent (Continuing Care recommendations)
- Creativity around connection

## Sexuality

- Studies show that women in recovery are scared that without alcohol they may not sexually function well.
- The reality is...???
- In recovery many parts of people start to come alive. This is also true of sexuality.
- Relapse triggers

## Spiritual Concerns for Women

- The term of Powerlessness
- Paradox: Step One “Powerlessness: A most powerful place” A Woman’s Guide to Recovery, Hazelden 2008
- Power: Mutual Help – Step Two
- Connecting to one’s own definition of spirituality
- Use of Intuition – AND check it out
- Empowerment
  - Surrender
  - Openness/vulnerability
  - Building life around honesty and responsibility

## May Need to Work on in Treatment

### Women

- Self reliance
- Program of action
- Empowerment
- Non-compliance/question
- Learn how to trust self
- Respect self
- Caring for self

### Men

- Letting go of control
- Identifying feelings
- Letting go of idea of being all powerful
- Compliance/Just do it
- Learn to trust others
- Respect others
- Caring for others

## Switching Addictions

- In early recovery feelings can be new and can be raw.
- In recovery people may switch addictions to cover up feelings.
- Various cross-addictions can be food, gambling, sex, relationships, work, shopping, etc.
- Fill the “Hole”



## The most common mental health concerns for women

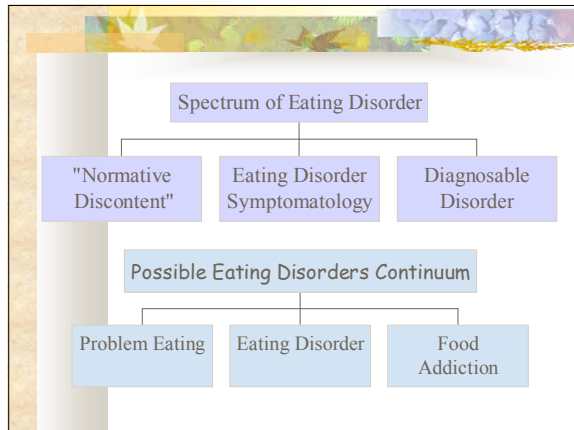
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Bi-Polar
- Eating Disorders
- Trauma



## Need for Differential Diagnosis

## Any Relationship with Substance Use and Eating?

Alcohol*	↓ Eating ↑ Purge
Amphetamines*	↓ Eating
Cocaine*	↓ Eating
Caffeine*	↓ Eating
Marijuana*	↑ Eating “Munchies”
Nicotine*	↓ Eating-Weight gain when stop smoking
Ephedrine*	↓ Eating
Laxatives-Not Addictive	↓ Eating ↑ Purging
Diuretics-Not Addictive	↑ Purge



- ### Substance Dependence and Eating Disorders - Similarities
- Chronic, long term and life threatening
  - Cravings, loss of control and pre-occupation
  - Uncontrollable, self destructive behavior
  - Shame as a deterrent to acceptance: Hiding and Sneaking
  - Medical consequences
  - Used for emotional regulation and distress tolerance
  - Compliance is a significant factor for recovery
  - Use similar tools, accountability, ask for help, connect with others

- ### Trauma
- About 75% of substance abusing women have a history of physical or sexual abuse as children
  - CD women have more perpetrators, more frequently and longer periods of trauma
  - Need safety first, then remembrance and mourning and finally reconnection. (Herman)

- ### Trauma
- Early Treatment Goal: Establish Safety
  - Early Recovery Goal: How to contain or express feeling without using
  - Relapse Risk: AOD use possible when anxiety-laden issues arise; address immediately
  - AA is a form of trauma treatment for the trauma of addiction
    - Create Safety, hear other's stories, tell the story
    - "Wreckage of the past"
  - Safety, remembrance and mourning, then reconnection

- ### Hormonal Concerns
- Change is a constant
  - Change over life-cycle
  - Record-keeping to look for patterns
  - Leave more stressful activities for symptom-free days
    - Diet
    - Rest
    - Exercise
    - Meditation
    - Getting support
    - Medical support
  - Practice these principles in all our affairs – H.A.L.T.S., ask for help, connection, support, accountability, doing the "dailies", etc.

- ### PMS or PAW?
- |                             |                               |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ■ Food cravings             | ■ PAW (Post Acute Withdrawal) |
| ■ Alcohol and drug cravings | ■ Forgetfulness               |
| ■ Irritability              | ■ Difficulty sleeping         |
| ■ Low energy                | ■ Clumsiness                  |
| ■ Forgetfulness             | ■ Poor concentration          |
| ■ Headache                  | ■ Over reacting               |
| ■ Low back pain             | ■ Moodiness                   |
| ■ Depression                |                               |
| ■ Difficulty sleeping       |                               |
| ■ Clumsiness                |                               |
| ■ Rage                      |                               |

### Program of Action

- Action, Not Feeling
- Self Soothing Plan

	Alone	With others
Day		
Night		

- Self Care
- Boundaries
- Just for Today



### Ongoing Recovery Concerns

- Physical Concerns, including chronic pain
- PAW
- Mental Health Concerns
- Feeling a Void
- Miserable with Cross-Addiction
- Dry Drunk
- Self-Sabotage
- Complacency

### Relapse Trail

Always

Always

Always

Warning Signs

Use Substances

“Just for Today”

### Most important word in the Twelve Steps for Ongoing Recovery?

\_\_\_\_\_

Which way am I facing?

Recovery or relapse bound?

Relapse is not inevitable!

### Today

- Just today
- Just for today
- Just for this day only
- Just for today I'll...

If what I did just today was what kept me in recovery, would I be in recovery today?



How free do you want to be?

Can you hear the flutter?