The Intersection of Substance Misuse, Mental Illness, and Alzheimer’s and Dementia

Beth E. Hurny, LMSW, CASAC
Executive Director

Donna Knapp
Team Leader Community Collaboration & Engagement

Prevention Network/OCAA 906 Spencer Street Syracuse, NY 13204

What is Elderly?

- The wisest American elders may never agree on who is elderly and who is not.
  - In Rhode Island elderly begins at 60
  - In Hawaii it arrives at 55
  - IRS Tax Counseling for elderly begins at 60

- “Elderly” may be more a state of being—or feeling—than a certain age. And the question may not be whether someone else thinks of you as elderly, but whether you think of yourself as elderly.

  Just because someone doesn't look or act elderly or vulnerable doesn't mean they aren't.

What are some challenges people face as they grow older?

- Retirement
- Loss of spouse, friends
- Isolation/less social contact
- More health problems
- Loss of independence
What are some ways people cope with these challenges?

**Positive Coping**
- Exercise
- Social Clubs and networks
- Attending senior center activities
- Faith based activities
- Visiting with family and friends
- Travel

**Negative Coping might lead to…**
- Isolating behavior and retreating from previously enjoyed activities
- Fear
- Illness
- Sleeping more
- Withdrawing from with family and friends.

Why might someone use/misuse alcohol or other drugs?

- Grief, loss, sadness
- Loneliness
- Stress
- Chronic pain
- Illness
- Sleep problems
- Social pressure
- Celebrations
- Reduce inhibitions

**What excuses/reasoning might someone give?**
- Elevate mood
- Mask depression
- Increase ability to sleep
- Increase ability to cope
- Decrease pain
- Deal with social pressure
- Gain acceptance
- Relieve boredom

Why is it hard to detect substance use disorders in older adults?

- Symptoms similar to other diseases
- Aging process
- Denial
- Prejudice and stigma
- Social isolation
- Societal bias
Signs and Symptoms

- Memory loss
- Depression
- Irritability
- Trouble concentrating
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Loss of coordination
- Unexplained bruises, chronic pain
- Dizziness
- Neglect of self, home, personal hygiene
- Difficulty staying in touch with family & friends
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Wanting to stay alone more frequently

Why does it matter when...

- Alcohol and medications are part of our society.
- Alcohol is used in celebrations, rituals, and social situations.
- Prescription and OTC medications provide relief, healing, and health.

To begin with...

- The physiologic changes in our bodies as we age influence a substance's effect on an older person
  - Decreased blood flow to the liver
  - Slower renal clearance
  - Decreased lean body mass
  - Decreased total body water
  - Interaction with medications used for chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, etc.
Many health problems can be exacerbated by alcohol and other drug use:
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Congestive heart failure
- Liver problems
- Osteoporosis
- Memory problems
- Mood disorders

Alcohol & Other Drugs don’t mix with some medications:
- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen
- Cold and allergy medicine
- Cough syrup
- Sleeping pills
- Pain medication
- Anxiety or depression medicine

Why it matters…
- #1 Characteristic of an abusive caregiver is Alcohol and substance abuse
- #1 risk factor for an elder is the victim's poor health including disability/functional impairment; poor personal defenses; poverty; possibly dementing illnesses
Substance use/misuse by an elder can lead to...

- **Impaired cognitive functioning**
  - Reducing ability to resist fraud
  - Detect coercion.
- Physical effects of substance misuse can render an individual more dependent on others for assistance.
- Forced or encouraged substance misuse could make an individual
  - More compliant
  - Easier to care for
  - Or easier to exploit.
- Substance misuse can lead to poor family relations, estrangement and isolation.

Substance use/misuse by a Caregiver

- **Financial exploitation** of their older family member, acquaintances or strangers.
- **Physical abuse** of an elder while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.
- **Neglect** of an elder’s basic needs.
- **Diversion** of an elder’s prescription medication.
- **Animal Abuse** of an elder’s pet as a threat or other avenue for venting frustration with caregiving situation.

Mental Illness, Alzheimer’s & Dementia

- Same risk factors exist for Elder Abuse with heightened concerns
  - Additional cognitive impairment
  - Increased caregiver frustration
- Alcohol and other drug use could possibly impact the progression of the above conditions.
- Symptoms of depression, anxiety, fatigue, and forgetfulness may be two to three times stronger than they would be for a person who has no drugs in his or her system.
### Should we be concerned?

- 2010 estimates 14-20% of elderly population (6-8 million older Americans) had 1 or more MH/SA disorder
- 2011 SAMHSA study reports 6.3% rate of illicit drug use (opiates, cocaine, marijuana) among 50-59 year olds (2.7% in 2002)
- Currently – 40 million adults aged 65 & older
- By 2030 – 73 million adults aged 65 & older

### Alcohol and Alzheimer’s

- NIAAA – plausible that alcohol use creates increased risk AD; no causal evidence
- Difficult to establish direct link due to nebulous criteria for alcohol induced dementia
- Effect of alcohol use on risk of AD has been studied much less than other potential risk factors (i.e. tobacco use)
- Heavy alcohol use influences cognitive impairment; cognitive impairment increases risk for AD

### Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome

- Combination: Wernicke’s encephalopathy and Korsakoff’s dementia
- Frequently occur together as both caused by thiamine (B1) deficiency
- Alcohol prevents body from properly processing this vitamin
- Most prevalent form of alcohol-related dementia
- Different from ARBD which persists after the individual ends relationship with alcohol
Other Risky Behavior & Elder Abuse

- **Gambling**
  - Most frequently identified social activity for those 65+
  - Time, boredom, activity level, advertising are stated reasons for engaging in excessive gambling.

- **Unprotected Sexual Activity**
  - Most commonly recognized risky behaviors in people 65 and older is alcohol use, hazardous driving behavior, and unprotected sexual activity.
  - Age is not a condom

Seniors and STDs

Sources

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- Alzheimers.net
- Alz.org
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