

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

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## 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.**

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## 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

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### 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.

**Alcohol and other drug use/misuse**

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### 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

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### 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

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## 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

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## 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.

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## 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.

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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

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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

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Why it matters...

- #1 Characteristic of an abusive caregiver is Alcohol and substance abuse
  
- #1 risk factor for an elder is the victims poor health including disability/functional impairment; poor personal defenses; poverty; possibly dementing illnesses

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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

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## Seniors and STDs

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## Prevention Network

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