

Women and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



It is estimated that one in every twenty pregnant women is addicted to some type of drug. One of the first questions that came to mind is "why do we need to differentiate between men and women in recovery?" I've discovered through my research that women are at risk for a number of things that men aren't in addiction. They respond differently than men. One of the things is the physical response. Women feel a stronger response when they use drugs or alcohol. If you were to get a man and a woman of the same weight and gave them drugs or alcohol the woman would have a much more physically negative response to it. Women also face addiction differently because of sociological reasons. Men and women are just simply seen differently in all aspects of life, including addiction. Even things such as hormones play a huge role in the way someone reacts to substance abuse.

Stigma is another huge battle that women have to face as there is a stigma attached to being a woman with a substance abuse problem. Women have to deal with getting less sympathy and more criticism. Even though men experience addiction at higher rates than women the stigma of abuse has been shown to affect women more harshly. The reason this is another roadblock in their recovery is that women are typically less inclined to admit their problems and go seek treatment. A lot of them just hold onto this and keep their addiction issues hidden from everyone they know because of the stigma attached.

Women face a unique set of circumstances and challenges when it comes to recovery. Addiction used to affect men more than women by a ratio of 5:1. Recent studies are showing that women are now closing in on men at about a ratio of 3:1. But when it comes to the much younger generation women are drinking and using drugs just as much as men. Also when it comes to treatment women are also far less likely to seek out and get any type of treatment to help them along in their sobriety.

This is from the National Institute on Drug Abuse:

"Scientists who study substance use have discovered that women who use drugs can have issues related to hormones, menstrual cycle, fertility, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause. In addition, women themselves describe unique reasons for using drugs, including controlling weight, fighting exhaustion, coping with pain, and attempts to self-treat mental health problems."

This shows that women are experiencing their addiction differently than men. Things such as a woman's hormones will make her process and feel the effects of the substances they are using differently than men. Also, things to consider can also be the way the brain changes over time from continued substance abuse, over time this happens at a different rate for men and for women."

So as you can see there are many things that factor in and that we have to consider when coming up with a proper approach to help these women.

So the first thing I think that should be addressed is how the brain and hormones affect women differently. Substance use in women usually develops into addiction more quickly than in men. The rapid progression of addiction is called the "telescope effect". It has been known to happen more with women in the addiction community.

One issue that is completely a woman's issue is the topic of pregnancy and addiction. Many pregnant women are able to stop once they find out they are pregnant but there are also many women who are unable to stop even though they are pregnant. About 5 percent of pregnant women report having abused a substance while pregnant. Add nicotine abuse to that and that jumps up to 16%. Many times women will use the entire pregnancy leading to their child to be born suffering withdrawals shortly after birth. This is called neonatal abstinence syndrome. The severity of this is based on the mother's amount of substance abuse during the pregnancy.

There are some measures that can be taken to help reduce the harm the woman is doing to their unborn child. As of now, nothing has been approved by the FDA to help pregnant women that are fighting addiction. Something that has been tried is medical assisted treatment (MAT) like methadone. The thing about methadone is that the child will still have withdrawal symptoms that need to be addressed at birth, so this is something to also consider. But at least in the meantime, the woman is reducing the amount of damage done to the child and herself.

The first thing that should be said is that using or abusing any substance while pregnant can do irreparable harm to the child. The fetus will absorb anything the woman ingests. There is also a very large chance of having a miscarriage or stillbirth. There are just countless harms done to the child should the mother be an active user.

The stigma is tough because women are seen to be caretakers and the ones that should be looking over the family the stigma is really quite large as they are going against the traditional ways expected of them.

Self-image and body issues could be a big part of a women's recovery. Many women develop poor self-image issues.

Another thing that seems to be more prevalent with women as compared to men is turning to prostitution to help pay for their drugs. Many women have hit tough times financially many times caused by their drug abuse. This leads them into a life of prostitution. Then there are others turning to drugs and alcohol as a way of escaping their day-to-day lives.

Essentially they are trying to numb themselves from the reality that they are prostituting themselves for drugs. The fact is that once these women get used to this type of lifestyle it is much harder for them to return to a more "normal" way of life. These women sometimes have gotten used to the fast cash that comes along with being a prostitute. And it's that cash that ends up making it right into the hands of the local dealer. These people that are addicted are quite often up for days on end. It turns into an endless cycle of going out and trying to get their fix and then going back to prostitute themselves to make money for their next high. It's an endless cycle of abuse.

Another ugly truth is that when a woman turns to prostitution many times she will be working under a pimp. This pimp many times will be the woman's main source of drugs. It's a common tactic to get women hooked on drugs and then keep them prostituting for the pimp in order for the pimp to give the drugs they so desperately want to them. In short, these pimps will use a person's addiction as a powerful tool against them in order to keep them in the hopeless cycle of addiction and prostitution. This keeps the prostitute continually coming back for more. It is a sad and ugly truth that comes along with this. This happens way more than people would like to know about. It is said that about 80% of the prostitutes in the United States have been with or are associated with a pimp currently.

So at the end of the day what can we do to help women that are currently dealing with addiction issues? I think as in any other type of treatment retention is extremely important. It has been shown that with the right type of treatment for the right amount of time women will have a much greater chance of achieving and maintaining their sobriety. There are some things that contribute to the success rate amongst women in addiction. This is shown in the research I found done by the National Library of Medicine. One major factor is age. It has been shown that women under the age of 21 typically don't do as well with their sobriety.

Another thing that was researched is the level of education of the women trying to get sober. It showed that women who completed high school are way more likely to stick with their treatment. There is also lower rates of recovery and retention in women of color. These are just some of the factors that were found in this research.

There are also other factors such as involvement from the criminal justice system and child services. These women typically involved have higher success rates of sobriety.

Women who also had custody of their children and were involved in either the criminal justice system or child services typically had longer lengths of sobriety.

I think we need to have separate treatments for men and women. Being that women suffer from specific issues that don't affect men we should have treatment resources to treat those specific issues. I think in the end what is needed is more research done on this. It will help us battle these issues once we can understand them more fully.

So what are some of the things women can do once they leave treatment? I think the first thing they should do is seek out a mental health professional such as a licensed therapist, psychiatrist or psychologist. Women can benefit from this approach greatly. It shows that women do better in a safe space that these professionals can provide for them. Women are also known to enter treatment with less self-esteem than men. Because of this, we need to take a different approach to the way we treat women in recovery. Another thing that has been shown to benefit women is in-person support groups of just women. The women-only group meetings have shown to be much more effective. Women feel they can open up more with other women and not having to worry about the men in the room.

There are many tools available to fight addiction. I think for all women it is just about finding the right one for you. There are many different paths to take but they all end up at the same place, sobriety.