

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## WOMEN AND ADDICTION

The topic of women and addiction is an important one. The role of a woman in today's society is critical, and the results of addiction can be destructive not only to the individual but to the family, the community, and society as a whole. The struggles of the addicted mother, sister, aunt, grandmother, niece, or friend tear at the very fabric of our society, leaving in its wake damage, tragedy, loss, and trauma.

From the research on women and addiction, we know the following:

- There are gender-based differences in alcohol metabolism. Women's bodies contain less water and more fatty tissue than men's bodies. The activity of the enzyme (known as ADH) that breaks down alcohol is decreased in women.

- Women develop alcohol-related diseases and smoking-related respiratory diseases (e.g., cirrhosis and hypertension, brain damage from alcohol abuse, lung cancer, emphysema, and chronic bronchitis) more rapidly than men.

- Women are more likely to develop depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, which are closely linked to nicotine, alcohol, and drug abuse.

- Women who use sedatives, anti-anxiety drugs, and hypnotics are almost twice as likely as men to become addicted to such drugs.

- A single cigarette smoked by a woman has nearly the same carcinogenic effect as two smoked by a man.

- One drink for a woman commonly has the impact of two drinks for a man.

- Moderate or heavy drinking increases the risk of breast cancer.

- Older women suffer memory loss and mental deterioration after fewer years of drinking than older men.

- Women often differ from men in their response to psychoactive drugs and to drug abuse treatment.

Our experience in the setting of addiction treatment reveals:

- By the time the addiction is intervened upon, it is more likely that a woman has reached mid to late stages of the disease.

- Women seeking help from the healthcare system are more likely to be misdiagnosed with a psychiatric condition, and the addictive disorder will often remain undetected.

- Due to the disinhibiting nature of intoxicants, women are at higher risk to become victimized and/or abused while under the influence.

- Tragically, women are more likely to be stigmatized as a result of their addiction. Their shame keeps them from coming "out" for a longer period of time. The internalized judgmentalism and denial can result in delayed diagnosis or lack of diagnosis.

- Loss and grief are often present, making motivation and engagement difficult.

- Sometimes the daily responsibilities that women take on make it difficult for women to commit the time and energy needed to make treatment for themselves a priority.

### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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When women consider getting help, the idea of treatment may generate more questions than answers. Do I really need treatment? What kind of treatment? Who will take care of my family while I am in treatment? How can I afford this? What if treatment doesn't work? The key is to make an informed decision. For an individual under the influence, this may not be possible. A spouse, partner, child, friend, or employer may be needed to explore available resources and then to assist the woman with accessing treatment.

Almost all patients with addictive disorders will not recognize that addiction is what they suffer from until it has been diagnosed. The myth of needing to reach "bottom" has no basis in fact and is a very dangerous concept. It is important for colleagues, friends, and loved ones to mobilize and help the person access treatment. Planned interventions work. Do not underestimate the power of helping relationships.

A person thinking about change is often profoundly ambivalent. Over-thinking and procrastination may be prevalent. She might be aware of the benefits of changing but feel powerless to do so and overwhelmed by the costs (not all of which are financial). You can assist by helping her to become informed. Develop a plan, move to implement the plan, and support her to be ready. Most individuals are unable to take the initial step into treatment themselves. All resources should be marshaled to allow this to happen in a safe and compassionate manner.

### Conclusion

If you are – or know – a woman who is suffering with addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, help is available. More than likely, there has been a lot of suffering and perhaps some questioning about whether addiction is the problem.

If any of this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Know that recovery is possible and that treatment works. The first step is simply to admit that you need help, and then seek the help and expertise of professionals.

Call the OAAP at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227 and ask to speak to an attorney counselor. It's free. It's confidential. Support is readily available to you.

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