

DRUG ABUSE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

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Abstract

Substance abuse is one of the major social problems in youth nowadays. Excessive use of any substance that has potential to alter our physical and mental state is called drug abuse. Both legal and illegal drugs have chemicals that can affect your body and mind state. These substances can give pleasure or ease the stress temporarily. Physically men and women are built differently. The scientists, who have conducted research on substance abuse, discovered that there are special issues in females which are related to hormones, menstrual cycle, fertility, pregnancy, breast feeding and menopause. Due to biological differences between male and females, females process and metabolize the drugs very differently from their male counterparts. Females are more sensitive to substance abuse and its long term impact on their body and mind. The female body retains these substances for a longer period of time. For the same reason they tend to experience more negative physical consequences with the same amount of consumption of substance as the males do. So females are more prone to develop dependency on such substances, hence they face issues like organ damage and related diseases. Apart from the physical aspects there are some psychological aspects that can add on to their problems like domestic violence, post-traumatic stress disorder, raising a family, and coping with mental health and adjustment issues which can further complicate their problems. Generally those who are facing the problems related to substance abuse are confused about their own behavior as well as the people around them. The main objective of this article is to create awareness about the harmful physiological and psychological impact of drug abuse in females, so that we can help them to maintain good physical and mental health.

Keywords: Drug abuse, Mental health, Psychological problems, Physiological problems.

INTRODUCTION

Some decades ago, drug abuse has been perceived as a problem only in male however, in recent decades attention has been shifted to female drug abuse and its serious repercussions. Various researches suggest that there is a sex difference in compulsive behavior (Potenza et al. 2001; Blanco et al. 2006). Drug addiction is defined as a chronic as well as compulsive behavior apart from its negative consequences. The gender-related sex differences in our brain can influence the responses to drugs. We use sex to refer to the characterization of an individual as female or male from biological and morphological features. It has been found there are similar sex differences in humans and rodents in addiction-like behaviours. This suggests that there are some basic biological differences between females and males that influence how each responds to drug abuse and engage in addictive behaviours (Becker et al. 2012; Perry et al. 2013b; Carroll and Anker 2010; Lynch 2006; Kerstetter et al. 2012; Becker and Hu 2008). Researchers in the social and natural sciences have demonstrated that addictions and consequences of addictions differ by gender (Becker et al. 2016). There are theoretical evidences of sex differences that women become addicted more rapidly than men (Anglin et al. 1987). Physicians, psychiatrists and social workers have believed since early in the 20th century that women escalate alcohol use more rapidly once they start (McClellan 2011; McClellan 2017; Kandall 1999).

The main objective of the paper is to throw some light on the effect of drug abuse in females and how these effects are different than males in psychological and biological aspect and furthermore to find out some possible causes and remedial measures of this problematic behaviour.

Scientists who study drug abuse 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. The main psychological and physiological triggers for drug use in women are:

- **Secludedness** -Women need social and emotional connections with other people to feel happy and fulfilled in their lives. Being alone or, worse, being in a crowd but feeling disconnected from everyone, is a sensation that can lead a woman to use drugs or to relapse in addiction recovery.
- **Stress and Anxiety** -Women tend to take multiple projects at work and at home, that leaves them with little or no energy. Due to high empathy level females are more likely to feel other people's emotions or worry. All of these adds up to a high level of daily stress, which is a trigger to drug abuse.
- **Fatigue** -All mental and physical stress makes women feel tired, usually in long working hours women do not tend to take break or rest in between hence resulting in increased stress levels which further results the increase in the urge of consuming drugs.
- **Hunger** – Generally women have high level of approval motivation than men, so women tend to be more affected by others opinion in comparison to men, and they also diet more often to keep themselves slim and trim. Instead of giving in to hunger by eating, many women use this condition as an occasion to punish themselves for wanting to eat too much or choose the wrong foods. Some will turn to drugs to make the hunger feeling go away without consuming more calories.
- **Low self-esteem** – People with low self-esteem generally develop such type of behaviour which reinforce their feeling of inadequacy, including drug abuse because they think that very little to live up to. Secondly, drug use can temporarily boost their low self-esteem. Many women suffer from self-esteem issues.They feel bad about themselves, so they do not believe they are worthy of good care. Drug use may be a way of masking the emotional pain of low self-esteem, or it could be an attempt to fit in with the group. Drug use can also be a form of self- abuse at subconscious level.
- **Body image issues** -Women often use drugs to attempt to change the perception about their look. If they feel they are very fat, the stimulants offer them the false promise of easy weight loss. There are some drugs that can be used to build extra muscle mass.When these approaches for

changing one's body image do not work, which are likely, drugs can be used to overcome this emotional pain.

- **Chronic Pain** – Chronic pain and associated symptoms are very complex and difficult to treat. Doctors need a cocktail of medicines to treat different aspects of pain. Most of these medicines which we use to cure these pains are highly addictive in nature. These drugs develop tolerance with time. This vicious cycle can lead to full blown addiction. Various studies around the world show that women experience more pain than men. Results were same in the developing as well as in developed countries. The results led to the conclusion that the difference in perception and tolerance of pain is physiological, not cultural. Throughout history, women have been told that the pain is all in their minds. Apparently, it's just not that simple. The painful conditions that women are more likely than men to experience include migraine, fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, irritable bowel syndrome and back pain.
- **Mental Illness** - Mental illness is a common casual factor to addiction. People who suffer from mental illness often struggle to relieve and overcome their emotional pain. Turning to drugs for escaping from reality is not uncommon. The feeling of detachment and euphoria, achieved with drug use can be seen as a solution to the irrational thoughts, fear, and anxiety that are associated with some common mental illnesses. While under the influence, problems seem to melt away and the person get a dose of happiness. Below is the data which indicates the mental illnesses that are more common among women which are as follows:
 - Panic disorder, anxiety, and phobias are twice as likely to occur in women as men.
 - 85% of all anorexia and bulimia is diagnosed in women.
 - Women account for 65% of all binge-eating cases.
 - Suicide attempts among women are two or three times more frequent than among men.
 - Women get depression at a rate of 12%, compared to 6% of men.
 - Traumatic incidents are twice as likely to lead to PTSD in women as men.

Some of the unique issues in women, who use drugs, are related to their reproductive cycles. Some substances can increase the chances of infertility (Backer et al., 2008; Jeosoefet, al.1993; Tolstrupet, al. 2003) and early onset of menopause. Substance use has also negative effect during pregnancy and breastfeeding. If a pregnant woman uses drugs, she can pass those drugs to her developing foetus that can cause negative impact to the foetus. Similarly, new mothers using drugs can pass those drugs to their babies through breast milk and cause them harm and hinder baby's growth. Women are just as likely as men to develop a substance use disorder (Anthony et al., 1994) In addition, women may be more susceptible to craving(Robbins S.J. et al. 1999; Hitschfeld et al., 2015; Fox H.C. et al., 2014; Kennedy et al. 2013) and relapse, Kippin et al., 2005; Rubonis et al., 1994) which are key phases of the addiction cycle.

Several biological factor plays a role in how women absorb, process, and experience drugs. Below are some of the factors that can contribute to the negative physical effects of substance abuse in women:

- **Body fat:** Women are physically smaller than men, so they typically have higher levels of body fat. Because many drugs are designed to dissolve in lipids, women are more likely to trap and retain certain drugs in their body for longer periods of time.
- **Water weight:** Some recent studies have found that when men and women of the same body weight consume equal amounts of alcohol, women have higher blood alcohol concentration levels. This is due to the lower volume of water in women's bodies compared to men's. Women have less water to dilute drugs and alcohol in their systems.
- **Hormones:** Specifically relating to painkillers, the female body experiences higher levels of pleasure and pain relief when taking drugs. Research has indicated this response is directly related to oestrogen, which tempers the body's pain receptors. Because of women's fluctuations in hormones each month, there are periods when it is harder to quit drug use. Markedly during menstruation, when glucose in the brain is at its lowest, women are more likely to relapse.

- **Stomach acidity:** Women have less acidity in their stomachs than men. Stomach acidity helps to break down certain drugs. With lower stomach acidity, women have been found to absorb certain drugs more quickly than their male counterparts. This means that they feel the effects of certain drugs, such as anti-anxiety pills, more quickly and strongly than men.
- **Liver function:** Drugs and alcohol are processed by the liver. According to gender-based research, men's bodies process these substances more quickly than women do. This means that drugs and alcohol tend to remain in women's livers, and women's bodies, for longer periods of time. This is a contributing factor to the presence of liver disease in females.
- **Kidney function:** Similar to the liver, men's kidneys work at a faster pace than women's do. Kidneys are responsible for filtering out drugs from the body. This adds to the fact that drugs stay in women's bodies longer than they do in men's, and puts women at greater chance of kidney disease later down the road.
- **Blood proteins:** Women have less binding capacity in their blood than men, meaning that their blood proteins are not capable of holding foreign substances like drugs of abuse. This inability puts them at greater risk for the adverse side effects of drugs.

Suggestions to Deal with Drug Abuse

There are, of course, much more effective ways to deal with chronic pain, mental illness and trauma than can cause to substance abuse. In fact, drug abuse becomes an additional problem on top of these others, rather than being the solution to anything.

Drugs may relieve pain, but that relief will not last for long. You will have to continue taking more and more drugs to achieve that same relief in the future. Meanwhile, the changes to your brain from the drugs can become permanent. Opioids block pain messages in the central nervous system, but they also slow heart rate and respiration. When combined with alcohol -another depressant -opioids are life-threatening. Overdose is a serious problem, especially when exceeding the doctor-recommended dosage.

Abusing alcohol and other drugs may mask the symptoms of a mental illness, but they will not cure it or even offer a long-term solution. Developing an addiction on top of a mental illness will only compound the problem. Before long, it will be nearly impossible to tell if you are experiencing symptoms of your mental illness, addiction or withdrawal. Addiction complicates mental health issues.

Being the victim or witness to a trauma is not your fault, but it can have life-changing consequences. Many women blame themselves for these situations, especially when they are the victim of abuse. Anxiety and depression can result, and adding alcohol abuse compounds that depression. PTSD, Anxiety, depression, and any substance addiction are life-threatening conditions that are best to be avoided. Facing chronic pain, mental illness, trauma or any other difficulty in life is a challenge. Here are some alternatives to self-medication that you could try:

- **Reduce stress** -Make some permanent changes in your lifestyle to reduce the amount of stress you're exposed to. If you're involved in an on-going traumatic situation, get out as soon as you can. You cannot begin to heal from the trauma until it stops. Find a way to stop it so you can focus on healing. Finding and cultivating new hobbies, and keeping yourself busy in healthy and positive things are the best way to keep your mind off from drugs. Rewarding and interesting hobbies can help you to find joy and purpose in your life by replacing unhealthy and harmful habits.
- **Eliminate access to drugs** -Access is a key component to drug use. You cannot become addicted to a substance you do not take. Question the need for prescription drugs, and only take them as directed by your doctor. Dispose of the excess pills immediately so they will not be available for you or others in the future. Ask your doctor for alternative means of pain management if your condition is chronic. If you're taking prescription medication, do not drink alcohol. Compounding the effects of both drugs will lead to addiction much faster.
- **Call a friend** -When you experience an emotional pain, talking about that pain, often help to feel you better and gain insight about your problems. Share your feelings with a trusted friend or your family member. Sharing and releasing your emotions with your close one can decrease those

pressures and tensions that are adding to your problems. Talking about your feelings will help to process and understand them better and can help you to feel at ease.

- **Join a group** -There are some support groups for everything, and they really help in recovery process. Find a group of like-minded and supportive people, whether you're suffering from chronic pain or recovering from an accident or traumatic experience or violent act. Listening to how other people handle those similar situations, and sharing your thoughts with them, will help you to reduce your feeling of discomfort, anxiety and depression. We all are social being, so human connections are very important for our mental health.
- **See a counsellor** -Mental illness is very serious and common health condition, but it is treatable. According to latest UN data, nearly one billion people worldwide suffer from some form of mental disorder. With the right professional help, you can learn to overcome your symptoms and live a happy, healthy and purposeful life. Try to find a counsellor who is specialized to you need specific or specialized in women's mental health issues. Counsellors can help you to understand the cause of your illness. In many cases, the illness can be completely cured with the right and proper treatment.

There are sex differences in behaviour related to drug addiction and relapses. Among the vulnerable populations, females escalate drug use more rapidly than males and relapse is more likely to be triggered by stressful events or drug-related cues. These differences are not solely biological. Sociocultural factors also differently affect men and women and how they respond to abuse of drugs. To sum up, it can be said that for treatment of drug addiction the approach should be multidimensional and personalized that include both medicine and psychological counselling. We need to cultivate new healthy and effective coping and adjustment skills to deal with our day to day life problems. We can also run preventive programs involving families, schools, communities and media to make people aware about the harmful effect of drug abuse.

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