



Addiction in Older Adults

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Today's objectives:



- Identify some common myths and misconceptions about older adults and addiction.
- Examine how addiction in older adults affects aging, family relationships and access to care in later years.
- Describe addiction as a brain disease.

Where we come from...



Since 1998, The Retreat has provided a continuum of alcohol and drug recovery services grounded in the spiritual principles of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Programs are designed to be affordable, accessible and community based providing programs for individuals 18 and over.

The Retreat has created one of the few age-specific (day) recovery program's designed for older adults age 60+.

Research grant



In 2010 the Trillium Foundation awarded a generous research grant to The Retreat.

This funding made it possible to explore the unique issues facing the rapidly growing population of older adults and the impact on substance use disorder for that demographic.

Part of this presentation is based on that research.

Challenges of caring for an older adult



Personal experience with an aging loved one informs my work. I understand the challenges of caring for an aging loved one struggling with addiction and how it affected family, relationships and the elder's access to care.

Myths about addiction and older adults



MYTH #1: It is unlikely that an older adult will become addicted to drugs or alcohol.

- 2.8 million older adults in the U.S. are struggling with alcohol abuse and 8 million abuse both alcohol and drugs.
- Fastest growing population of alcoholics in the U.S. are 75 year old widowers.
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Addiction notes that elderly alcoholism is a national epidemic, under-reported and under-treated.

Major blocks to getting help



Shame and Denial

- Many of those in their late 70's or 80's aspired to the American Dream.
- They may have led lives of great accomplishment.
- Addiction is often viewed as a moral failure.
- This is complicated by denial from the family, the individual, even senior housing.

Boomers (Born 1946-1965)



Greater tolerance. Strongly self reliant.

- Boomers came of age on the heels of the Vietnam War, Woodstock, etc.
- More acceptance and experimentation with drugs.
- Higher divorce rate.
- Image of a drug addict often different.

Myths about addiction and older adults



Myth #2: Once someone gets older it really doesn't matter so much if they abuse alcohol or drugs.

- "Let Dad have his fun."
- Research shows that alcohol abuse consistently predicts unsuccessful aging.
- Damages health, relationships and social supports vital as we age.

Care conference road block



The case of the unproductive care conference.
Why some families members won't help mom...

In her own words...



"Drinking when you get older is no longer a relief- maybe for 5 minutes, but then it is depressing. It feels shameful and you feel guilty. The whole things comes back on you like a hurricane."

- Faye, age 62, Retreat alumni

Myths about addiction and older adults



Myth #3: My loved one is just too old to change.

- Older adults who seek help and get sober experience higher rates of sustained recovery than their younger counterparts

Drugs or alcohol?



- Whether on purpose or not, prescription drugs are the most pervasive form of addiction for older adults.
- Pervasive belief that if the drugs are doctor prescribed they must be ok.

Number of drinks



- More than one drink a day increases the risk for falls, fractures, strokes and other health problems.
- As we age, the amount of water in the body decreases. Alcohol becomes more concentrated in the system.
- At the same blood alcohol level, older adults will feel the effects of drinking more dramatically than those who are younger.

White knuckle abstinence or joyful recovery



- Contented sobriety is possible with the support of an age-specific program and a community of peers.
- "Some people might look at what I lost and what I have now in comparison and not think I have a lot. But I have a whole new set of friends and a community of support, and I am happier than I have ever been- even before I started drinking!" -Alicia, Retreat Alumni, age 70

Brain disease model of addiction



- Many still believe that drug addiction is simply a failure of will or of strength of character. Research contradicts that position.
- "We need to first recognize that drug addiction is ... a complex brain disease characterized by compulsive and at times uncontrollable drug craving, seeking and use, despite devastating consequences."

Nora D. Volkow, M.D.
 Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

Will power is not enough



Addiction is defined as a disease by most medical associations, including the American Medical Association and the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

What contributes to addiction as we age?



- Health care providers may confuse substance abuse with other health problems.
- Loneliness, isolation.
- Major life changes (loss of spouse, job, health, income, purpose).
- Easier to hide addiction when not driving or working.
- Many of today's older adults have disposable income and considerable free time. Creating meaning and healthy management of this time should be a part of any substance mis-use program for elders.

Age specific recovery works



Valuable recovery strategies for seniors include a program that is age-specific, supportive, aiming to build self-esteem, and re-build a social network and sense of community.

Handwriting practice lines

Warning signs harder to detect in Older Adults



- Changes in mood, unusual restlessness, anger, depression, abusiveness.
- Has irrational fears, delusions, or seems under unusual distress.
- Unexplained complaints of chronic pain or vision problems.
- Neglect of home, bills, pets, poor hygiene.
- Only wanting to go to events where drinking is accepted.
- Has lost interest in activities that used to bring pleasure

-Continued

Handwriting practice lines

Warning signs harder to detect in Older Adults



- Drinks in spite of warning label on prescription drugs.
- Suffers frequent falls and bruises and tries to hide them.
- Withdrawal from social activity, isolation.
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts.
- Seizures, memory issues, slurred speech.
- Disposes of large volumes of empty beer cans or liquor bottles.
- Makes a ritual of having drinks and becomes angry if ritual is disturbed.

Handwriting practice lines

Why it matters...



This is the age to integrate life experience, knowledge, and spirituality. Addiction keeps older adults from: reevaluating life to create deeper meaning, experiencing freedom of and comfort with who they are, achieving personal integrity, developing a more encompassing view of life itself, giving back to the community, and celebrating a place among family and friends.

Seeking God



I sat down to talk with God one day
and asked where do I look for you
How do I find you
You already do look for me God said
How is that I asked
You look for me by shopping when you are low
and by taking that extra drink when you are stressed
You work long hours hoping to find your worth
and you eat to fill that empty place within
Your most creative way of looking for me is
expecting someone else to make you happy
These are all just signs you are looking for me
When you know this is true
You will find me
- Janet O. Hagberg, 2006

Models for recovery



There are a variety of models for recovery.

- One key distinction is Clinical verses Non-Clinical, Education and Community based recovery.

Clinical model



- Highly structured. Indicated when a higher level of care is required. (Co-occurring disorders)
- Medical professionals on staff: psychiatry, psychology, medical doctors. Therapy based.
- Valuable for individuals needing bio, psychological, social testing or medical oversight.
- Good option if an individual isn't sure that they are addicted to alcohol or drugs.
- Typically accept insurance, residential may cost upwards of \$20,000 - \$50,000+ a month.

The Retreat: educational, community-based, non-medical approach



We believe that if we provide a dignified, safe and supportive environment, accurate information about the problem and the solution, and a solid bridge to Alcoholics Anonymous, people will recover." - John Curtis, President

- Appropriate for those individuals who know they have a problem with alcohol and/or drugs and have a willingness and desire to get sober.
- Respectful, caring sober community formed on the spiritual foundation of helping one another build new lives in recovery. The Retreat surrounds you with people from all walks of life who, are motivated to change. Through mutual support and time tested tools of Twelve Step Recovery hope can be found.
- Over 400 volunteers in recovery sharing their message with guests monthly.
- Accessible and affordable. (*scholarship money is available*)
- Outcomes meet or exceed national average for treatment facilities.

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At The Retreat, individuals will:

- Gain insights and practical skills needed to live a happy sober life.
- Learn from others who are living the Twelve Step principles of Alcoholics Anonymous at the highest level.
- Practice the principles of recovery alongside a community of recovering staff and volunteers who share their experience, strength and hope.

Guests stay at The Retreat for 30-90 days, based on individual needs or circumstances. The cost of the program includes participation of a loved one in our four-day residential Family Program.
