Woman Abuse, Substance Abuse: What is the Relationship?

When substance abuse and violence against women happen together, many people get confused about cause and effect. Does alcohol or drug use cause a perpetrator to get violent? Does being a victim of violence cause a woman to develop substance abuse problems? If a woman abuses alcohol or drugs, does this mean she asks for trouble? Here, based on research, are answers to some commonly asked questions.

**Does alcohol or drug use cause violent behavior?**

Studies show that people who get violent when intoxicated already have attitudes that support violence. They believe they have the right to control another person. They believe violence and other abuse are acceptable ways to gain control. A perpetrator may use intoxication to excuse violent or abusive behavior. But substance abuse is no excuse for crimes such as domestic violence or sexual assault.

**Will treatment help a perpetrator stop being violent?**

If a woman leaves an abusive relationship, her partner may promise to get treatment or attend A.A. meetings. These promises may be a way to manipulate her into returning. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that substance abuse treatment will stop violence. If physical violence stops, other abusive and controlling behavior often replaces it. A perpetrator must confront attitudes that support violence.

**Does being a victim of violence cause substance abuse?**

Not every abused woman uses alcohol or drugs. So there is not a direct cause-and-effect relationship. But trauma can increase a woman’s risk for substance abuse. Some women may use alcohol or drugs as an anesthetic, to relieve the pain caused by violence. If the pain continues, and the “self-medicating” continues, conditions are perfect for addiction to develop.

**If a woman abuses alcohol or drugs, does this mean she asks for trouble?**

No woman deserves to be abused in any way, no matter what else is going on. If she is in a relationship, does this mean her partner must overlook substance abuse? No. Her partner has a right to ask that she get counseling or other help. Her partner has a right to end the relationship. But drinking or drug use never justifies violence.

**Why is substance abuse risky in a violent situation?**

While substance abuse does not cause violence, it can make a violent situation more dangerous. If the perpetrator is intoxicated, there is a greater risk the victim will be injured or killed. If the victim is intoxicated, she may find it harder to get safe.

Women coping with violence and their own substance abuse may find themselves caught up on a merry-go-round. Substance abuse makes it harder to escape a violent situation, or to heal from past abuse. Continuing violence or unresolved feelings about abuse make it harder to stay away from alcohol or drugs.
**How does substance abuse interfere with safety?**

Substance abuse impairs judgment. This makes safety planning more difficult. The victim may avoid calling police for fear of getting arrested or being reported to a child welfare agency. She may be denied access to shelters or other services if she is intoxicated.

**How does substance abuse interfere with healing from violence?**

If a woman is abusing alcohol or drugs, it is hard to heal the pain caused by violence. Counseling or therapy sessions can bring out strong emotions. Alcohol and drugs cut off these emotions, and the feelings get pushed back down inside. So the work cannot go forward. The healing doesn't happen. The pain continues.

**How does violence interfere with recovery from addiction?**

A woman may use alcohol or drugs to “stuff” her feelings about the abuse. When she stops drinking alcohol or using drugs, buried emotions may come to the surface. These feelings of pain, fear or shame can lead to relapse if not addressed.

In an abusive relationship, a woman’s recovery may threaten her partner’s sense of control. To regain control, her partner may try to undermine her recovery. Her partner may pressure her to use alcohol or drugs. Her partner may discourage her from seeing her counselor, completing treatment, or attending meetings. Her partner may escalate the violence.

**How can a woman get off this merry-go-round?**

Many women have found they will need to address both the substance abuse and the violence. A domestic violence agency can help a woman who is in an abusive relationship. A rape crisis center can help if she has been sexually assaulted or sexually abused. Substance abuse treatment can help if she has problems with alcohol or other drugs. No matter where she goes for help first, her counselor or advocate can make referrals. This way, she can get all the services she needs.

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4 Simmons, Katherine P., Terry Sack and Geri Miller. Sexual Abuse and Chemical Dependency: Implications for Women in Recovery. *Women and Therapy 19* (2), 22