



## Support available to help seniors with addictions

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Have you ever noticed that auntie seems to be wobbly, grandma is slurring her words, dad is in the hospital again for another fall?

Has it ever been a concern that your elderly relative or friend doesn't remember well anymore? Did you have a thought that Uncle Harry doesn't get out any more and wondered why?

If you noticed that grandma had stumbled after a cocktail did you think, "if drinking makes her happy, so what?"

If the above symptoms occurred to those younger than age 60, more than likely substance abuse would easily be identified and some sort of intervention could occur: an employer's ultimatum, a spouse threatening a divorce or attention from the courts.

Unfortunately, addictions in the elderly often are overlooked; there seems to be an assumption that their problems are due to their physical health and aging.

The assumption that problems may be due to aging could be accurate: the elderly have difficulty metabolizing drugs and alcohol as efficiently as when they were younger. It takes at least three times longer for drugs to be metabolized from an elderly body.

Of major concern are the multiple medications prescribed. Thirty percent of the elderly take eight or more prescriptions. That is not counting over-the-counter medications also in the medicine cabinet, such as Nyquil, Sudafed and others.

Forty percent of all benzodiazepines prescribed are to the elderly. Common names are Ativan, Xanax, Librium and Valium. Lortabs and other painkillers

also are a concern because if one is good, then two must be better.

Keeping medications organized and being taken correctly may become a problem; many of the above medications can cause confusion. It's no wonder that 20 percent of people ages 60 and older may be addicted to various substances.

The elderly are very good at hiding their addictions. That ability and society's "agism" prevent them from getting the help they need.

One study revealed that physicians accurately diagnosed 60 percent of substance users in those younger than 60 and only 37 percent for those older than 60. So what needs to be done?

Denial is as strong in the elderly as in their younger counterparts. But treatment is just as effective.

The elderly person in treatment needs a team that may include a physician, treatment center, therapist and family support. No one should ever stop medications abruptly.

If you are assisting the elderly, never just take away the medication. Doing so could cause severe withdrawal and even death. Certain medications must be tapered and monitored by a physician.

The first consideration for trying to figure out if a senior is having problems with substances would be to make sure the behaviors are not due to physical problems. For example, if an elderly person has a urinary tract infection she could appear to be under the influence or have dementia.

The following are some symptoms that could indicate addictions: increased frequency of drinking, irritability and mood instability when not drinking,

lying about drinking habits, blackouts, signs of withdrawal such as tremors when not drinking, increased forgetfulness, hiding alcohol or pills, weight loss, isolation and running out of medications before the refill is due.

Care should be taken in approaching seniors about addictions; their generation often times keeps problems to themselves as "it's nobody's business." If you are concerned that someone you know may have a drug or alcohol problem, you may want to consult a professional to discuss your next step.

If you believe the person has been drinking too much or overusing his medications, show empathy for his health and be direct in sharing what you have observed. Should he be willing to go for assessment or treatment, have the name of a treatment facility handy and be ready to make appointments quickly. As a relative or friend of the alcoholic or drug-addicted person, you will find great support and direction for yourself at an Al-Anon meeting.

Our elderly are valuable resources rich in knowledge and tradition and deserve quality of life to the end. It's never too late to seek help from a professional. Help is available in our community.

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