

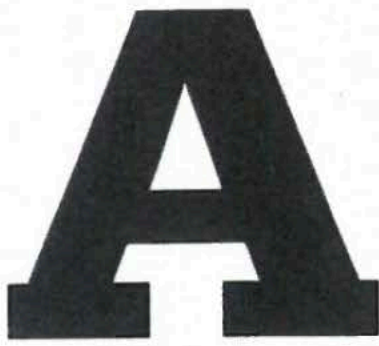


Do Women Experience Addiction Differently?

Gender-responsive care offers a tailored approach to treatment.

By Lantie Elisabeth Jorandby M.D.

MARY LONG/SHUTTERSTOCK



S IN MANY AREAS OF HEALTH AND MEDICINE, THE research

on addiction and addiction treatment has historically focused on the male population. Studies were conducted on male subjects by male researchers. But when it comes to addiction, gender matters. Women often develop addiction for different reasons than men, begin treatment for different reasons than men, and stay sober for different reasons than men.

Addiction treatment is evolving to reflect that reality. One treatment protocol in particular—gender-responsive treatment—is showing significant promise.

How Women Develop Addiction

Research and anecdotal evidence have identified at least three paths to addiction that may be more prevalent among women than men. The first and most troubling involves past or ongoing trauma. Around 65 percent of my female patients have had at least one past traumatic event that may be contributing to their addiction. Among men, the incidence of trauma is lower, although still significant at around 50 percent.

A second path that women take to addiction more often than men leads through their mental health care. A common trajectory: Women are more likely than men to see their doctor for anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and the like. When they do, they are often prescribed medication for those conditions, and some of these drugs can lead to addiction. When that occurs, these women may gravitate to opioids, which deepen their addiction, according to a 2005 study published in *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*. Medical providers are more aware of this situation than we

once were, and we're implementing such measures as prescribing non-opioid medications and pain relievers. But there's still plenty of room for improvement.

A third path is that women may be more likely to follow their male partners toward harder and more addictive drugs, rather than the other way around, according to a report published in *Gender and Psychopathology*. Unfortunately, women also tend to have a lower tolerance to these drugs than men. This means they often become addicted more quickly and wind up needing treatment sooner.

Women Get Sicker Quicker

The reasons behind this "sicker quicker" phenomenon haven't been well studied, but likely due to physiological and hormonal reasons, women do tend to become addicted more rapidly than men do, according to a review in the *Journal of Neuroscience Research*. Their addiction contributes to making them ill more quickly as well, with chronic ailments such as liver disease, high blood pressure, and

other conditions.

My female patients may arrive after struggling with alcohol-use disorder for, say, two years. Some of these women are in really rough shape. They're badly addicted, and they're sick with one or more chronic conditions that are exacerbated by their addiction. The men I see, on the other hand, often take as long as five to 10 years to reach the same level of addiction and sickness.

It's heartbreaking to see this level of distress in my female patients, and that is why it's so important to spread the message that women need to get help sooner rather than later.

Barriers to Treatment Are Harder to Overcome

Even when women are hurting, and when they know that treatment would be their best move, evidence reported in *Alcohol Research and Health* in 2006 suggests that they are, on average, less likely to take that step than men.

There are several reasons for this disparity. Women tend to feel more shame and guilt about having a substance-use disorder and seeking treatment for it. Women tend to be less financially independent than men; they're less able to afford treatment and to take time off work. Women tend to do the majority of the parenting. When considering treatment, they may think, No way, I can't leave the kids now. Maybe later. Last, women may be in a relationship with an unsupportive partner who makes comments like, "You're not that kind of person" or "You need to look after the kids."

Gender-Responsive Treatment Shows Promise

An important distinction: Gender-specific treatment in a rehab setting means having separate facilities—one for women, one for men. During daily

programming, the two genders sometimes stay separate and sometimes mingle. With gender-responsive treatment, on the other hand, the gender split runs through everything—from the design of the physical environment to the programming to the topics covered during therapy sessions. Gender-specific treatment is essentially the "lite" version, whereas gender-responsive treatment is all-encompassing.

Gender-responsive treatment programs are occasionally used in the

aims to allow women to more easily share social pressures, expectations, and personal experiences, eliminate potential distractions that may occur during treatment, explore self-care and relaxation, and build community with one another.

I've found that women tend to respond to gender-responsive treatment better than men. Why? Perhaps because a relatively high percentage of women who come into treatment have experienced either trauma or abuse

in their past. Women may be more comfortable working through this difficult personal history in a women-only setting.

The Time for Progress

Gender-responsive treatment is a step forward in the addiction treatment field, and it will likely continue improving as protocols are fine-tuned and best practices are shared among therapists. Among women and men, the data on gender-responsive treatment is positive. People stay in treatment longer when they're in a gender-responsive setting,

according to a study review published in *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*. And relapse rates may be lower among people who complete gender-responsive programs, as reported in a literature review in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. Gender-responsive treatment doesn't have all the answers, and it's certainly not perfect. But it's a big step forward. ■

Lantie Elisabeth Jorandby, M.D., is a board-certified psychiatrist with a specialty in addiction psychiatry and addiction medicine. She is currently the chief medical officer of Lakeview Health in Florida.

It is
heartbreaking
to see the level
of distress in my
female patients.

criminal justice system—with women on probation or out on parole—and also in the juvenile justice system. But by far, their main application has been in addiction treatment.

The premise behind gender-responsive treatment is three-fold: 1. Women and men may develop addictions for reasons that are specific to their gender. 2. Women and men often seek treatment for reasons that are specific to their gender. 3. Finally, women and men frequently respond to treatment for reasons that are specific to their gender. In a nutshell, women and men often get addicted, go into rehab, and respond to rehab for gender-based reasons.

Gender-responsive treatment