

Substance Abuse and Family Violence

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Woman Abusers and Substance Abuse

Research indicates that men who drink regularly are more likely to abuse family members.

The National Violence Against Women Survey (1993) indicates that alcohol is a prominent factor in wife assault. In one half of all violent partnerships, the perpetrator was usually drinking. The rate of wife assault for women currently living with men who drank regularly (at least four times per week) was triple the rate of those partners who did not drink at all. Women were at six times the risk of violence by partners who frequently consumed five or more drinks at one time, compared to women whose partners never drank.¹

"[we would have a] honeymoon phase, then [his fuse] ... got shorter and shorter, ... come Thursday night, the house would just fill with tension. The weekend was coming, he was going to go out and he was going to drink, so he was going to get something going ... so he would have an excuse to say, "well, we were fighting" and then he would go out on Saturday night and not come home until 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning..."

The relationship between family violence and substance abuse is not directly causal substance abuse does not cause family violence nor does family violence cause substance abuse. While the issues of substance abuse and family violence are often interrelated, not every person who abuses substances will perpetrate family violence. But when they do occur together, the impact of each problem may be intensified. Although these problems may sometimes appear to be directly linked, it is important for service providers to remember that they are distinct issues and that each problem needs to be addressed separately. Family violence does not necessarily stop when the abuser stops abusing alcohol and/or other drugs.

"[we both] joined AA and I thought "oh now things will change," but there was no change in fact if anything he was even more [abusive] ... to me..."

~ continued

Woman Abuse
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Research

www.isn.net/~tha/womanabuseresearch/

The quotes in this document are from PEI women interviewed in 1999 during herStory of woman abuse and the PEI justice system, a project of the Woman Abuse and the PEI Justice System Research Team of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research.

There are several potential reasons for the frequent connection between substance abuse and family violence:

- *alcohol or other drugs could reduce inhibitions so that the socially unacceptable behaviour of woman abuse is more likely to occur;*
- *the abuser may have learned to connect family violence and substance abuse by growing up in a family where they both occur;*
- *the abuser may be better able to "excuse" his violent behaviour, and is even sometimes "... my husband, he downsized [the abuse by saying], "it's just one bad night", he's drinking and you just don't think that it's going to happen again to you." excused by his partner and other family members, because he was drunk and "not in control";*
- *the abuser may abuse substances to diminish his feelings of guilt or shame.²*

While these theories may help us to understand the connection between family violence and substance abuse, they do not excuse the violence. It is crucial that responses from service providers or by laws or sentences do not encourage abusers to use substance abuse to avoid the issue of accountability.

Victims and Substance Abuse

Not only does the research show that men who abuse substances are more likely to abuse their partners, it also shows that victims of family violence are at greater risk for alcohol and other drug problems than those who have not experienced violence in their relationships. "An average of 63% of women seeking assistance with violence issues are estimated to also have a substance abuse problem and an average of 66% of women seeking assistance with an addiction problem are estimated to have also had previous experience with violence."³

Some potential reasons for this connection are that alcohol and other drugs may be used by women living in abusive relationships to cope with the physical, emotional or psychological pain of family violence or that women who were abused as children may use substances to deaden the pain of past memories.⁴

1. Campbell, Colin and Julie Devon Dodd, *Fact Sheet on Family Violence and Substance Abuse*, National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, December 1993
2. Adapted from Campbell, Colin and Julie Devon Dodd, *Fact Sheet on Family Violence and Substance Abuse*, National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, December 1993
3. Meredith, L. M., *Establishing Links: Violence Against Women and Substance Abuse*. London, ON: Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 1996
4. *Women, especially those who have been abused, can benefit more from specialized women's programs than from the traditional male-oriented treatment programs. For more information, see Addiction Services for Women, Policy Guide, PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women, May 2001*