

Matters of Substance: Navigating Alcohol Use as a Woman

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As 2019 begins, we at the IIC are pausing to think about the many women who may be taking stock of their alcohol use. For women, this is most often done in silence, and alone. Due to the particular shame women face about substance use, the different cultural factors involved in alcohol use for women, and the particular challenges they navigate in seeking help, women end up seeking out help with substance use less than men do. For many, they worry about losing their children if they talk about alcohol use, they can't find childcare to attend appointments, and they fear being shamed and judged.

Alcohol overuse accounts for 88,000 deaths a year in the United States. Cirrhosis and deaths related to alcohol have been on the rise since 2006. Binge drinking is now diagnosed more frequently in young women than men, and our culture is heavily invested in promoting excessive drinking as a fun, independent, glamorous thing to do. Marketing alcohol use to mothers has intensified over the past 10-15 years, with "wine-o'clock" and "Mommy's Time-Out" blogs, and books tout alcohol as the way to manage the stresses of being female, a mother, and a caretaker.

It's an onslaught and part of why more women of late are beginning to re-evaluate the emotional and physical costs of using alcohol to cope on a daily basis. While medical groups define excessive alcohol use for women as beyond 8 drinks a week, most who exceed this don't meet the diagnostic criteria for alcoholism or dependence. What's most important is how your use affects your daily life. Alcohol use is a personal inventory just as recovery is different for everyone. One size does not fit all and all pathways to feeling better are valid.

While both men and women may turn to alcohol for relief from underlying depression and anxiety, women who rely on alcohol to manage very often carry a history of sexual abuse in their teens, domestic violence, the onslaught of cultural pressures about body image and being the "perfect mother" while working and parenting, and the daily grind of self-doubt and feeling invisible. Many women are joining online support groups to speak of their isolation, the expectations of caretaking and working, and how they turned to alcohol to forget, to relax, to find a respite.

The good news for 2019 when it comes to women and alcohol use is that there are now so many more ways to make change! Whether a woman wants to live sober or wants to change how and when she uses alcohol, whether she needs medicine to manage cravings or finds therapy a big help, whether she attends the women's meetings in AA or likes Smart Recovery instead: it's all valid. IIC's Wellness Services team work this way and is always here to listen to your goals and how we can help you get there.

We're passing along a few great resources to jump start anyone who may be taking a look at her alcohol use this year, and please be in touch for any help navigating it all!

- Caroline Knapp's book: *Drinking : A Love Story*
Great memoir by Boston journalist
- www.soberistas.com
Online worldwide support for women seeking change
- www.sobermommies.com
MA based online community for women & alcohol change
- aaboston.org
Full schedule of meetings including women's meetings
- App: Check-up & Choices
Popular new app for making changes in alcohol use



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Photo: The IIC Wellness team is here for you! We provide confidential, culturally competent counseling and case management. Contact us for a chat, to problem solve, and to figure out the next best step for you!

