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WOMEN'S ALCOHOL ADDICTION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Introduction

As an addiction, alcoholism presents a serious public health issue. For its progressive rise worldwide and underlying specificity and implications, alcoholism in women takes a serious note. It is more prevalent among men, but nowadays it shows increasing prevalence in women as well. (1) Assumptions are that the number of women with alcohol addiction is rising more rapidly than that of men. (2)

Alcoholism, affecting both men and women, has some specific traits, which primarily pertain to the *causes* essentially rooted in one's personality, regardless of gender.

Specificity of alcoholism in women is also outlined by a multitude of socio-economic, cultural and historical factors. Social movements brought about major shifts in the overall social relations between men and women, thereby giving rise to significant changes in family relationships. (3)

Personality, with all concomitant characteristics, is predominant incitant for the occurrence and development of alcoholism in women, squired by

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environment and *lifestyle* (3). **Personal** characteristics play a significant role in causing alcohol dependency. They pertain to the set of individual features increasing a person's predilection to develop alcohol addiction.

The identification of different personal characteristics in alcohol-addicted women may have long-term benefits regarding addiction treatment, intervention strategies, etc. (4)

Basic characteristics of alcohol addiction

Alcoholism is an illness – addiction to alcoholic beverages. Such dependency is manifested by a powerful urge to consume alcohol, loss of control over alcohol intake, increased tolerance to alcohol, and occurrence of crises in the organism lacking alcohol. Alcoholism is also deemed a severe/chronic mental disorder owing to the pathological process which alters the way the brain works. (5)

Alcohol addicts in the long term manifest serious health problems, such as liver cirrhosis, alcohol poisoning, cardiovascular disease, renal failure, and a whole array of psychological disorders, most frequently psychosis.

However, alcohol has numerous indirect consequences, too: violence, traffic collisions and injuries, workplace injuries, increased crime rate, etc.

In medical terms, alcoholism is said to exist in the presence of any two or more symptoms listed below:

- The person drinks larger quantities for a longer period of time;
- The person has difficulty reducing and control over alcohol intake;
- The person most of the time is under the influence of alcohol;
- The person has strong cravings for alcohol;
- The person under the influence fails to meet obligations given;
- The person under the influence of alcohol displays many social issues;
- The person under the influence of alcohol manifests many health problems;
- The person under the influence of alcohol tends to withdraw from the social environment;
- The person under the influence of alcohol gets involved in numerous risky situations including, among others, drink driving and unprotected sex.

Prevalence of alcohol in our country and worldwide

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in the recent period there were about 210 million people with alcoholism worldwide (4.1% of the population aged above 15 years). (6)

In the USA, around 17 million (7%) adults and 0.7 million (2.8%) aged 12 to 17 years are struck by alcoholism (6). It is more frequent in men, mostly youth and mature-aged individuals, and becoming less frequent among middle-aged and senior-aged groups. Alcoholism has the lowest rate in Africa, with a share of 1.1%, and the highest rate in Eastern Europe, measuring around 11%. (6)

WHO data shows that around 2 billion people worldwide consume alcohol and around 76.3 million have been diagnosed with alcohol abuse and addiction. Alcohol addiction is present in a significant portion of the adult population, around 3-5% in the developed countries, whereas hazardous and harmful alcohol consumption affects a much higher percentage of the general adult population, i.e. from 15% to 40%. (6)

The 3.3 million deaths in 2013 (5.9% of deaths in total) are ascribed to alcoholism.

The World Health Organization estimates that in the last decade around 17 million people have died from cardiovascular diseases ensuing from alcoholism, which accounts for 29% of all deaths.

Besides chronic diseases of people consuming it in vast quantities, alcohol is also responsible for traumatic injuries potentially causing disability or death of people from all age groups.

It is estimated that each year in Europe, non-material damages, resulting from alcohol addiction, amount to EUR 68 billion.

Alcohol is the cause of about 2 million deaths (3.2% of total deaths) and loss of EUR 58.3 million (4% of total amount). Such deaths most often are provoked by various accidents following alcohol consumption. (7)

In Europe, women make up 20-35% of all alcoholic consumers, which adds up to a very high percentage on a global level.

Characteristics of alcohol abuse in women

The *development* of alcoholic illness hinges on three key factors: man, environment and alcohol.

Occurrence and development of alcoholism in women is predominantly spurred by **personality**, with all concomitant characteristics, and, to a much lesser extent, by the *environment*. The environment traditionally expresses

negative attitude towards women who consume alcohol, considering it socially unacceptable behaviour. (8)

As regards numbers, accurate data on the number of female alcoholics is hard to obtain. Still, many surveys have shown that their number is on a continuous rise. Increased number of female alcoholics, in general, is evident, with the highest share in the USA and some West European countries.

Data from the world and European literature suggest that *male to female ratio for alcohol dependence in the beginning of the sixties measured 8:1, which, compared to the previous period, showed an increased alcoholism rate in women. Ten years later, this ratio was 6:1, and today, on average, it amounts to 5:1. The ratio of male to female alcohol dependence is, however, not identical for all countries, although it has approximate values in countries with the highest prevalence of alcohol illness.* (9)

It is estimated that alcoholism in women is the most prevalent in Great Britain, whereas for every three male alcoholics there is one female alcoholic (3:1), followed by Norway (5:1), Germany (5:1), USA (5:1), France (6:1), Canada (6:1), and from the countries nearby, Croatia, which ranks fourth in Europe for the consumption of alcohol, with male-to-female ratio for alcohol dependency of about 4:1. (10).

Modern-day life induces higher incidence of alcoholism in women. The gravity of the situation ensues from statistical parameters, indicating that the number of female alcoholics grows more intensively in comparison to the overall rise in the number of alcoholics. (1)

Alcoholism in women bears certain distinctive characteristics related to the causes for its occurrence as an illness, to the ways of drinking, to age, and to consequences from excessive alcohol consumption. Specificity of alcoholism in women is also marked by a large number of socio-economic, cultural and historical factors. Personality, with all concomitant characteristics, forms the basis for the occurrence and development of alcoholism in women.

State of play in the Republic of Macedonia

Development of alcoholism, with focus on women, predominantly hinges on *personality* characteristics.

The survey carried out in the Republic of Macedonia gave the following results:

- Respondent sample encompassed female alcohol addicts aged 38 to 67 years, with the most common average age of 53 years.
- As for education, secondary education was most common.

- In terms of residency, most respondents are from the urban area.
- Individual traits such as neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience are commonly seen in female alcoholics, that is, they exist in female individuals in the Republic of Macedonia who manifest alcoholism.
- Neuroticism is highly present in female alcoholics in the Republic of Macedonia.
- Extraversion is highly present in female alcoholics in the Republic of Macedonia.
- Aggression is highly present in female alcoholics in the Republic of Macedonia.
- Conscientiousness is scarcely present in female alcoholics in the Republic of Macedonia.
- Openness to experience is highly present in female alcoholics in the Republic of Macedonia.
- There is a medium level of positive correlation between dimensions of the individual trait neuroticism, that is, *depressed mood* and *low self-esteem in female individuals manifesting alcoholism* in the Republic of Macedonia.

In general, it can be concluded that individual traits are largely instrumental to the incidence of alcoholism in women.

Recommendations and suggestions

Policy making for alcohol abuse should put special attention on women, having in mind that survey's recent data point to the propensity of women, in correlation to personal characteristics, to develop alcohol dependency and manifest the illness – alcoholism. (13).

1. Response of alcoholism treatment services – in need of changes. In view of the fact that the issue of alcohol abuse up until recently was chiefly related to the male population, there is need to establish gender-sensitive services. Namely, they ought to address the increasing number of women abusing alcohol.
2. Prevention programmes. Most studies done on the younger population (14, 15) point to the need to create youth prevention programmes, such as... a prevention programme recommended by the WHO.
3. Promotion of the data collection system... Data collection, naturally, should segregate data by gender, thereby facilitating the creation of gender-sensitive policies and services.

4. Social campaigns on the adverse effects alcohol abuse has on women's health.

Alcohol abuse has major influence on the overall public health. It generates an array of costs related to health protection, health insurance, enforcement of legal provisions, maintaining law and order, protection at work, and many other costs, both material and immaterial, having a negative impact on the functioning of families, and society's socio-economic development in general.

Consequences from alcoholism are reflected on many social issues, related to domestic violence and violence in a wider social context, physical and psychological abuse of children, and workplace injuries and absences.

WHO's "Health for All in the 21st Century" sets up a goal that by 2015 alcohol consumption per capita would not exceed 6 litres a year, or nearly 0 for persons under the age of 15.

Abstract

As an addiction, alcoholism presents a serious public health issue. For its progressive rise worldwide and underlying specificity and implications, alcoholism in women takes a serious note. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in the recent period there were about 210 million people with alcoholism worldwide (4.1% of the population aged above 15 years); around 2 billion people worldwide consume alcohol and around 76.3 million have been diagnosed with alcohol abuse and addiction. Alcohol addiction is present in a significant portion of the adult population, around 3-5% in the developed countries, whereas hazardous and harmful alcohol consumption affects a much higher percentage of the general adult population, i.e. from 15% to 40%. Alcohol abuse has major influence on the overall public health. It generates an array of costs related to health protection, health insurance, enforcement of legal provisions, maintaining law and order, protection at work, and many other costs, both material and immaterial, having a negative impact on the functioning of families, and society's socio-economic development in general.

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