

# Young Women and Addiction: Detection, Treatment, and Recovery

While addiction to alcohol and other drugs is an equal opportunity disease, young women are affected differently than young men. Generally speaking, young women progress faster in addiction than young men, face different barriers in getting help, and recover differently.

Recognizing this can be critical in identifying addiction and determining the most effective treatment options. Gender-specific treatment programs can be extremely beneficial for most young women. Six key considerations are discussed below.

## 1. The reported incidence of addiction among young women is rising.

Historically, young men have had a higher reported incidence of substance abuse and dependence, but today the rate of abuse and dependence among young men and young women is about equal. Until recently, it was not uncommon for a young woman to be diagnosed with a medical condition or mental health concern without being asked about her drinking or drug use. Or, if asked, she may have denied the problem. Today, addiction is more readily identified and directly addressed.

## 2. Young women progress faster in addiction than young men.

Physiological differences accelerate the progression of addiction for women compared with men. The female body processes alcohol, and to varying extents other addictive substances, differently than the male body does. Women have less of a stomach enzyme that breaks down alcohol. This leads to greater blood alcohol concentration. Women also have more fatty tissue than men, so alcohol is absorbed more slowly and stays in the bloodstream longer, exposing the brain and other organs to higher concentrations of blood alcohol for longer periods of time. One drink for a woman can have twice the physical impact as one drink for a man.

## 3. Young women face different barriers in getting help than men.

Young women tend to hide their addiction better than young men, who typically act out in more overt ways. Young women are likely to isolate themselves and internalize their struggles through self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders or cutting. Given these isolative behaviors, intervention for young women occurs further along in the disease progression.

### **Building trust.**

“Part of the treatment process for young women is learning how to build trust, how to talk with each other, how to be of support, and how to accept support.”

—**Katie Schultz,**  
LADC, LICSW  
Unit Supervisor

#### 4. Depending on individual needs, a variety of treatment options are available for young women.

By the time most young women enter addiction treatment, their lives are in deep turmoil, and they are unable to manage their emotions. They have likely experienced significant trauma—often in the form of assault or bullying—and they’ve turned to drugs to numb the emotional pain.

Gender-specific treatment programs can be extremely beneficial for most young women. It’s not uncommon for young women to look to men for attention in order to feel better about themselves emotionally. When young men are treatment peers, young women can be distracted from focusing honestly and intently on themselves and their recovery. For young women with co-occurring mental health issues such as anxiety, trauma, or eating disorders, treatment programs offering specialized treatment tracks is important. Also, young women ages 18 and under benefit from being in a program that involves and educates family members. After treatment, the patient will likely return to her home environment, where parent and sibling support can be hugely beneficial.

#### 5. Faultfinding and judgment are counterproductive to effective treatment.

Powerful feelings of shame and guilt can hinder young women in treatment who typically struggle with trust issues—with each other and with program staff. So it’s important to work with addiction professionals who help the young woman to be accountable without faultfinding or judgment. Accountability is key. Faultfinding is counterproductive. The old “break-them-down-to-build-them-up” approach doesn’t work because young women already feel broken by the time they reach treatment, and they don’t turn to each other for help and support. Part of the treatment process for young women is learning how to build trust, how to talk with each other, how to be of support, and how to accept support.

#### 6. Young women recover from addiction differently than young men.

Young women are wired for relationships, so recovery from addiction is all about connection. Remember, addiction is an isolating condition. Young women lose themselves and their most important relationships to addiction. Peer relationships are extremely influential for young women. Much of the healing process of recovery revolves around connecting with others who share the struggle.

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The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, is a force of healing and hope for individuals, families and communities affected by addiction to alcohol and other drugs.