

# Midlife Crisis:

Addiction After 40



SILVER RIDGE

A PREMIER PROGRAM BY PYRAMID HEALTHCARE

# Table of Contents

FOREWORD.....	3
SUBSTANCE ABUSE, ADDICTION AND DEPENDENCE .....	4
WHY OLDER ADULTS MAY DEVELOP AN ADDICTION .....	8
THE MOST COMMON ADDICTIONS AMONG OLDER ADULTS .....	13
ADDICTION MAY BE DIFFICULT TO DETECT AND DIAGNOSE IN OLDER ADULTS .....	15
SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ADDICTION IN OLDER ADULTS .....	19
WHY OLDER ADULTS MAY NOT SEEK HELP FOR ADDICTION .....	21
TREATMENT WORKS, AND IT IMPROVES YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE .....	23
HELP IS AVAILABLE FOR OLDER ADULTS WITH A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER .....	27


## Foreword

Addiction is a disease that affected an estimated 22.7 million Americans in 2013.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of substance use disorders is highest among young people, with an estimated 7.5 million people between ages 18 and 25 needing treatment in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Drug abuse and addiction also affect older Americans, with 2.3 million adults over 40 in need of treatment for a substance use disorder.

Unfortunately, only a fraction of people who need treatment for addiction receive it. A 2016 study released by the Surgeon General found that while one in seven people in the U.S. is expected to develop a substance addiction, only around one in 10 will seek treatment.<sup>3</sup> Without treatment, a substance use disorder typically worsens, and treatment is almost always needed to send the addiction into remission.<sup>4</sup>

Older adults who develop a substance use disorder face a number of unique challenges. Until recently, very little attention was given to the addiction epidemic facing aging Americans. Even as the number of older adults who develop an addiction increases, these numbers are underestimated, and addicted individuals are underidentified, underdiagnosed, and undertreated.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding substance abuse disorders and how they affect older adults can help you to help yourself or an aging loved one get the help they need to enjoy a higher quality of life and reduce the risk of early mortality.



Substance Abuse,  
Addiction  
& Dependence





What we once called **substance abuse, addiction and dependence** are now wrapped up into a single diagnosis called a substance use disorder, which is classified as mild, moderate, or severe depending on how many of the eleven diagnostic criteria are met. Still, the terms substance abuse, addiction and dependence are widely used, and understanding the differences among these diagnoses is crucial for understanding how they're treated.

## **Substance Abuse**

Substance abuse occurs when someone uses drugs or alcohol in a way that causes problems. This could include DUI, financial difficulties, relationship problems or health issues. It could include risks taken under the influence that someone wouldn't normally take, such as driving under the influence or walking in an unsafe area at night. While substance abuse isn't the same thing as addiction, chronic abuse of drugs or alcohol can lead to addiction and dependence.

## Addiction

Addiction is widely considered to be a disease that has biological, cultural and environmental underpinnings. Addiction can be systematically diagnosed and successfully treated, much like other chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. Like those diseases, addiction can be prevented with proper education and lifestyle changes.

Addiction is characterized by the inability to stop using a substance even though it's causing problems in your life related to health, legal status, finances and relationships. People with an addiction may find it impossible to quit using a substance for the long-term, even if they want to stop or have tried to quit.

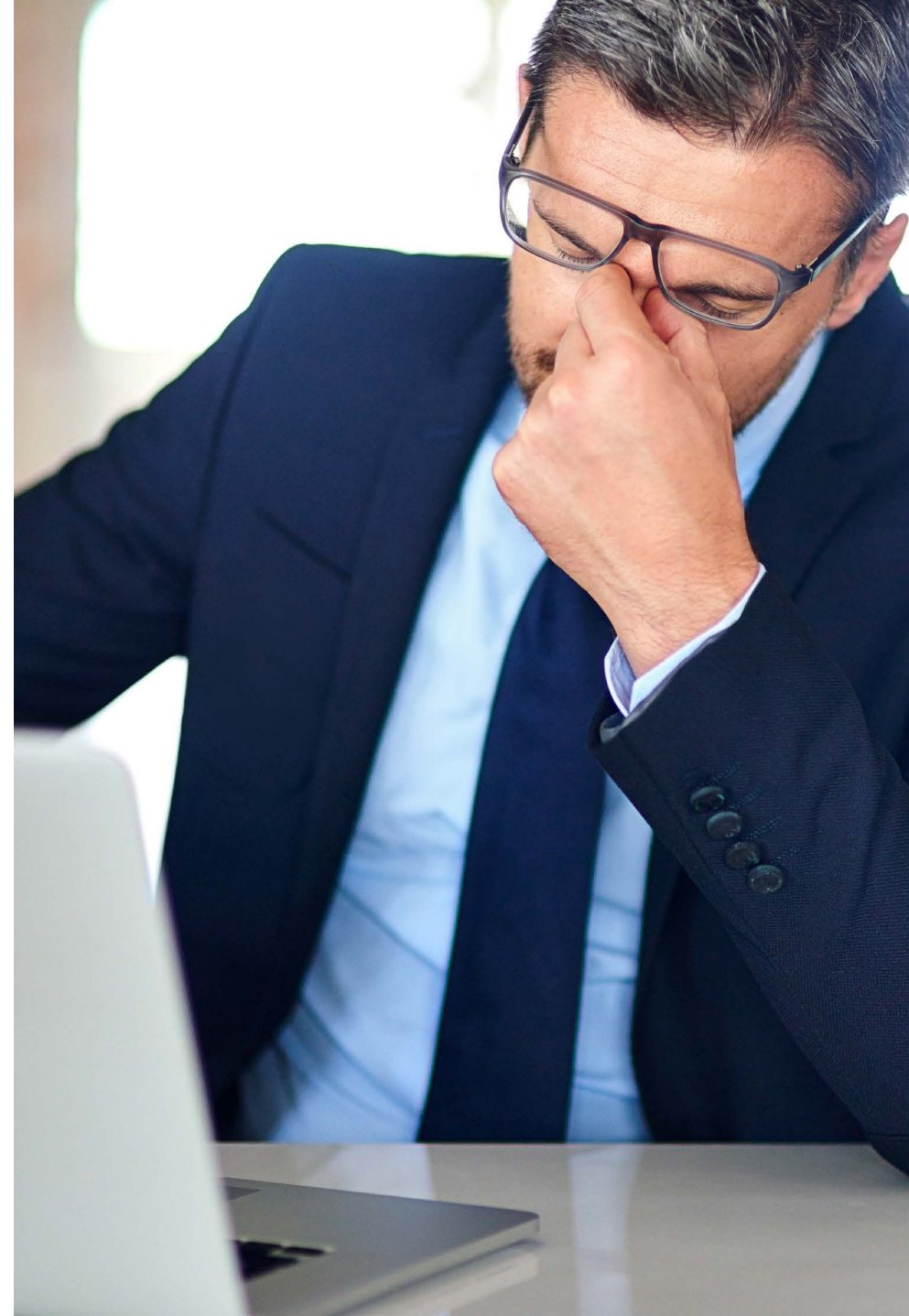
This is because addiction changes the structures and functions of the brain, and it affects behavior. Powerful connections made in the memory, reward and motivation systems of the brain lead to intense cravings and strong psychological associations between pleasure and substance abuse, and it typically requires intensive therapy to break these connections and develop healthier ways of thinking and behaving.



## Dependence

Addiction and dependence are not the same thing. Although they most often occur together, it's possible to be addicted without being dependent, and vice versa.

Dependence is characterized by the physical need to consume drugs or alcohol in order to stave off withdrawal symptoms, which occur when the function of brain chemicals changes so that the brain operates more "normally" when drugs are present than when they're not. When a substance is withheld, brain function rebounds and causes withdrawal symptoms, which can range from mild to severe and can quickly lead back to using a substance simply to end the discomfort.





A person is seen from behind, sitting on a dark wooden bench on a grassy area. They are looking out over a body of water towards a horizon under a vast, cloudy sky. The lighting suggests either dawn or dusk, with soft light breaking through the clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# Why Older Adults

*May Develop an Addiction*



Addiction most often begins in adolescence, and preventing teens from using drugs and alcohol is a major focus of a wide range of government entities, public schools and community organizations. But little attention is given to addiction prevention for older adults, who abuse substances differently and for different reasons than young people. However, with the number of older adults with a substance use disorder projected to reach 5.7 million by 2020, policymakers are feeling pressure to allocate funds to prevention and treatment among this population, according to a study by several organizations, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>6</sup>

A number of risk factors can increase the chances of an older adult developing a substance use disorder.

#### Causes of addiction in older adults:

- Past Drug Use
- Age-Related Differences in Physiology
- Life Events Involving Loss
- Illness
- Mental Health Problems

#### Past Drug Use

According to the above-mentioned study, older adults who first used alcohol or drugs between the ages of 17 and 20 are twice as likely as those who initiated use between the ages of 21 and 32 to develop a substance use disorder after the age of 50. Those who initiated use before the age of 16 were four times more likely than those who initiated use after the age of 33 to develop a substance use disorder later on.

## **Age-Related Differences in Physiology**

Alcohol is the major substance of abuse of older adults, and the way aging people metabolize alcohol may play a role in the development of an addiction.<sup>7</sup> Older adults have less body water than younger people, and they have an increased sensitivity to alcohol paired with a decrease in tolerance. Alcohol in the gastrointestinal tract is metabolized more slowly in older people, which means that the blood alcohol content stays raised for a longer period of time, increasing the risk of developing addiction and dependence.

## **Life Events Involving Loss**

Certain life events can trigger the abuse of drugs or alcohol, potentially leading to addiction and dependence. For example, alcohol abuse is more common among older adults who have been divorced or separated, and older adults may turn to drugs or alcohol for comfort after the death of a spouse. Losing family members and friends to illness and death becomes more common as we age, and people may use drugs or alcohol to cope with these losses.

Retirement is a loss of a different kind that can leave older adults with financial difficulties and a great deal of unwelcome free time. It also removes important job-related social supports many adults enjoyed and relied on for much of their life. A lack of life structure and a reduction in self-esteem associated with retirement can be a powerful catalyst for substance abuse.



## Illness

Chronic illness can lead to substance abuse as a coping mechanism, and older adults who are on psychoactive medications that can be abused, such as painkillers or sedatives, may develop a dependence on those medications. Poor health and diminished mobility that come with age can leave older Americans feeling lonely, isolated and bored, and many may turn to drugs or alcohol to fill a void.

## Mental Health Problems

Research shows that up to 30 percent or more of older adults have a primary mood disorder that may precede a substance use disorder.<sup>7</sup> While older women are more likely than their male counterparts to suffer from depression, both men and women in older age groups are likely to report feeling depressed prior to drinking alcohol, and alcohol and drugs may be used to reduce feelings of depression or anxiety.





## Gender

Older men are far more likely than older women to develop alcohol-related problems, and older men who drink are up to six times more likely than their female counterparts to experience substance-related medical problems. However, older women report more negative consequences of alcohol abuse than older men, and they're more likely to use prescription drugs with high abuse potential, including medications prescribed for anxiety and depression.



The Most Common  
*Addictions Among Older Adults*





### The most common addictions among older adults:

- Alcohol
- Sedatives
- Hypnotics
- Benzodiazepines

Alcohol is the most common substance of abuse among older adults. Problems related to drinking alcohol, including interactions of alcohol with over-the-counter and prescription medications, far outnumber other substance abuse problems.

Heroin abuse and opioid addiction are rare among aging adults, even when opioid pain relievers are prescribed. But other prescription drugs, in particular hypnotics, sedatives and benzodiazepines prescribed for anxiety, seizures and insomnia, are high on the list of addictive drugs commonly abused by aging populations. Benzodiazepines account for up to 23 percent of all drugs prescribed to older adults, and the problematic effects of these drugs include interactions with alcohol and other prescription drugs, a higher risk of injury due to falls, and problems with memory that are often incorrectly attributed to dementia.<sup>5</sup>





## Addiction May Be Difficult

To Detect & Diagnose in  
Older Adults

A range of studies have consistently found that older adults are less likely than younger adults to receive a primary diagnosis of an alcohol use disorder.<sup>7</sup> One study found that of 417 hospitalized adults, only 37 percent of older adults were accurately diagnosed with a substance use disorder, compared with 60 percent of younger patients. This and other studies show that older adults are under-diagnosed and under-treated for substance use disorders.

To complicate matters, substance abuse at a later age has a more severe impact on health than it does at a younger age, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, which points out that drug and alcohol problems account for 11 percent of hospital admissions, 14 percent of emergency department admissions and 20 percent of psychiatric hospital admissions among older adults.<sup>8</sup>

#### A number of factors contribute to the difficulties in diagnosing a substance use disorder in older adults.

- Hurried Office Visits and Multiple Doctors
- Non-Applicable DSM-V Criteria
- Secrecy
- Different Attitudes Toward Older Adults

## Hurried Office Visits and Multiple Doctors

Visiting the doctor is often a rushed affair, and doctors may not spend enough time with a patient or ask the right questions to determine whether a substance use disorder is present. Older adults also often see multiple health care providers and take a number of medications whose side effects may be blamed for symptoms that are actually related to substance abuse.

## Non-Applicable DSM-V Criteria

Addiction is typically diagnosed using the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM-V. Eleven criteria are used to diagnose a substance use disorder and determine its severity. Depending on how many of the criteria apply, a substance use problem will be classified as mild, moderate or severe.

However, some of the criteria may not apply to an older adult and therefore may not count toward a diagnosis. For example, one of the criteria is "a failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school or home." In many cases, this may not apply to older adults who have retired and who have very few family obligations due to an empty nest. Another of the criteria, "continued use of the substance despite persistent or recurrent problems," may also not apply, since many older adults don't realize that their problems are related to substance abuse. Health care professionals often attribute certain problems related to addiction, such as relationship issues or health problems, to the aging process or to age-related physical or mental health issues like dementia or depression.





## Secrecy

Aging adults often view alcohol and drug addiction as a moral issue rather than a medical one, and they may be more private in general due to the cultural norms they grew up with. Fear of being stigmatized and shame about their condition often lead to silence and secrecy. Older adults are likely to hide their substance abuse from friends and family, who may overlook the symptoms or attribute them to aging or illness.

## Different Attitudes Toward Older Adults

Attitudes toward aging adults may preclude medical professionals or family members from addressing a loved one's addiction. "But Grandpa is so happy when he drinks," and "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" are common attitudes that may enable an older adult to continue abusing a substance without much fanfare. In some cases, younger relatives may feel that quitting drugs or alcohol at an advanced age is pointless and will do more harm than good.



Signs & Symptoms  
of Addiction in Older Adults



The signs and symptoms of addiction may be slightly different for aging adults than they are for younger populations. Signs and symptoms that you or an aging adult in your life may be addicted to drugs or alcohol include:

- Using drugs or alcohol in secret or when alone
- Observing a ritual of drinking before, during or after dinner
- Losing interest in hobbies and activities once enjoyed
- Drinking even though the warning on a prescription label advises against it
- Slurred speech, glassy eyes or the smell of liquor on the breath
- Drug paraphernalia or empty bottles around the house
- Chronic health complaints that are unsupported by diagnostic evidence
- Hostile behaviors
- Depression or anxiety
- Memory loss or confusion
- Unexplained bruises from falls or other accidents
- Social withdrawal
- Discomfort when confronted about drug or alcohol use



## Why Older Adults

May Not Seek Help  
for Addiction



The low prevalence of older adults seeking help for a substance use disorder is due to several factors. Adults in older age groups view addiction with disapproval and may feel a great deal of shame if they're addicted. They often feel that their substance abuse is a private matter, and they won't bring it up with their physician or family members. This demographic is more likely to hide their substance abuse, and they're less likely than younger adults to ask for help.

Those who do seek help for an addiction may find it difficult to find a treatment program that's designed to address the unique needs of older adults.





## Treatment Works

& It Improves Your  
Quality of Life





Aging adults who have developed a substance use disorder are more likely than their sober counterparts to report being lonely and to have a low life satisfaction. Drugs and alcohol have a devastating effect on an older adult's health and quality of life, and beating an addiction at any age can dramatically improve an individual's outlook and physical and mental health.

Older adults respond best to non-confrontational treatment approaches and benefit from cognitive-behavioral therapy and a slower treatment pace. A high-quality treatment center for older adults will offer a program based on the unique physiological, social, spiritual, emotional and mental health needs of an aging population.

In many cases, treatment can help an older adult rekindle an interest in life after a traumatic loss that may be at the root of an addiction, or it can help to improve social functioning to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Through traditional and complimentary treatment therapies, a high-quality, holistic rehab program will address the complex issues of body, mind and spirit to provide a balanced, positive approach to addiction recovery.



The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration stresses that there is no single pathway to recovery, and an individualized plan that takes a holistic approach to treatment offers the best outcomes in terms of long-term success.<sup>9</sup>

### **Therapies commonly used in a holistic program include:**

**Motivational interviewing** to help people in treatment uncover their intrinsic motivation to beat an addiction, which guides the recovery plan and improves a client's level of engagement in treatment.

**Cognitive behavioral therapy**, which helps clients examine their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes and identify those that are unhealthy and which contribute to the addiction. They learn to replace old, harmful ways of thinking with new, healthier and more realistic ways of looking at the world.

**Group therapy**, which provides a communal experience that enables participants to share their stories, synthesize their experiences, draw support from peers in similar circumstances and offer support to others.

**Art and music therapy**, a proven complimentary treatment therapy that helps individuals tell their stories in new ways. It helps them look at the world in a different light, express experiences and emotions that may be hard to put into words, and work through a variety of issues using their inherent creativity.

**Meditation**, which is becoming an increasingly mainstream way to treat a wide range of illnesses, including addiction. Meditation improves self-awareness and leads to more mindful ways of living. It can help reduce cravings, and it's known to reduce stress and even change the way the body responds to stressful events.

These and other treatment therapies used in a holistic program are designed to address the complex issues that underlie an addiction as well as help individuals find purpose, enjoyment and meaning in life to improve their well-being and help prevent a relapse.



A woman with short, styled grey hair is seated in a grey armchair. She is wearing a red short-sleeved top and blue jeans. She is looking towards the right side of the frame, where a silver laptop is partially visible. The background is a soft-focus indoor setting with a white wall and some purple and green plants on the left. A dark blue rectangular box with a white interior is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image, containing text.

Help is Available  
for Older Adults

With a Substance Use Disorder



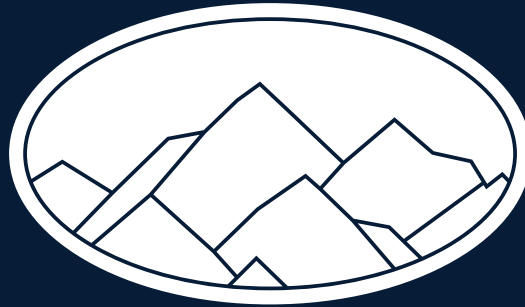


Addiction is a complex disease of the brain that causes changes in behavior and compromises both physical and mental health. Getting help overcoming an addiction can transform your life. It can improve your health, increase feelings of well-being and improve your overall quality of life. Addressing the complex issues behind an addiction through a variety of traditional and complimentary therapy leads to healthier ways of thinking and behaving, and it helps clients develop essential coping skills and strategies as well as improve social functioning.

Hope is the foundation of recovery, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.<sup>9</sup> Hope is the belief that a better future is possible. Through treatment and a strong support system, you or your aging loved one can realize a happier, healthier future free of addiction.

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# SILVER RIDGE

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A PREMIER PROGRAM BY PYRAMID HEALTHCARE

Silver Ridge serves established midlife adults who need to retreat discreetly from their daily lives. Here, we provide the perfect setting to focus on the addictions compromising your relationships, your future and your legacy.

**Every great legacy has a strong foundation. Build yours here.**