

Women Talk About Substance Abuse and Violence

Ten women were interviewed about their experiences with substance abuse and violence. All 10 were survivors of some form of abuse: battering, rape or sexual assault, incest or child sexual abuse. In addition to the violence, all of them had experience with alcohol or drug abuse, either on their own part, on the part of their partner, or both.

At the time of the interviews, all of the women had left their abusive relationships, and those with chemical dependency problems were in recovery. They talked frankly about the impact of the substance abuse on their efforts to escape the violence and heal from abuse. They also discussed the ways in which their experiences with violence affected their efforts to recover from alcohol or other drug addiction.

Q: What was your experience with physical or sexual abuse?

A: I was in my abusive relationship for 16 years. I couldn't eat or sleep or go to the bathroom without permission. I was beaten. I was repeatedly raped. I had guns in my ears, guns down my throat, guns at my neck, guns at my stomach. I couldn't tell anyone the truth because he said he'd kill me. I knew he would.

A: Our third date he moved in with me. And about a week later he punched me upside the head and knocked me out of a chair. One night he dragged me out of bed cause I wouldn't give him any money and beat me up. I said no one time and that was it. He just started beating me. Just cause I said no.

A: After six weeks of dating, this man tried to strangle me.

A: I was a 17-year-old unwed mother and 2 days after I found out I was pregnant, he made me pull the car over and when I got out of the car, he hit me with his fist in the stomach.

A: He raped me. And when the kids came home from school, he bought them a pizza. We all had pizza. He could come home and rape me, order a pizza like nothing happened.

A: I was sexually abused when I was 5 years old. He fondled me and I fondled him. I knew that something was wrong. He said not to tell anybody.

A: I had incest in my life. I remember being in my mother and father's bedroom. And I remember feeling real physical harm inside. I had severe vaginal pain. I don't know how long that went on, but I do know it all happened before I was 8 years old.

Q: What were your personal experiences with alcohol or drug use?

A: When I was a little kid, we all got shots of whiskey. And I loved it. You got that warm feeling and everything was going to be okay.

A: For as far as I can remember, I've had some sort of substance in me. I started using drugs when I was 10 years old.

A: I had my own little chair in a closet and I'd go sit in there, just me and my bong.

A: We used marijuana every day. I did a lot of cocaine. When I used cocaine, all I wanted to do was that next line. I didn't care about putting the kids on the bus or getting the kids to school. I lost my children.

A: I was a blackout drinker from the age of 15. My alcoholism was sitting home sipping wine all day. I could sip the whole gallon. I thought I was crazy. Not really thinking, well, it's the alcohol.

A: One day I didn't want to drink and I had to. It was the scariest feeling. I got the shakes. I was real nervous, and I knew a drink would fix that.

Q: Did you see your substance abuse and woman abuse as being connected in any way? For example, did you drink or use drugs to help you cope with your feelings about the woman abuse?

A: Whenever he'd get really angry and the fights would start, it was easier for me to just go in the back bedroom and get stoned and try to put it all away.

A: For me, the substance abuse when I first started using was over abuse, was over a rape, and so that's how I learned to cope with any type of abuse was to get high, and it made everything okay.

A: I was darned lonely. I had no friends. I had nobody to talk to. So I started smoking more, getting high more often, with every aspect of the abuse, between the isolation, the physical abuse, the sexual abuse. This way, I didn't feel any pain. I didn't feel any guilt. I didn't feel anything. I didn't want to feel.

A: I just didn't want to be conscious of my actions or his actions.

A: All I know is, when I was being abused, all I wanted was more and more. The marijuana wasn't enough. Then I started getting into the crack. It was easier just to stay stoned and numb and not have to deal with it. The drugs were what made me forget about all the abuse and set aside the fear and the terror I had from the abuse and that was my only escape. It was a way to get away from my husband and not feel trapped.

A: I've known for 10 years that I had a serious problem with drug use but I was not willing to give it up because that was my way of coping. The drug didn't hurt as bad as reality hurt.

Q: Did your partner abuse alcohol or other drugs? If so, did you see a connection between his substance abuse and the violence?

A: The basement was off-limits to me. I was never allowed in the basement. He was a drug addict and that was where he kept most of his drugs.

A: He drank, and he used marijuana heavily. He also used other drugs. The abuse kept going. Not even just when he drank. I mean stressful times. He really hurt me, and I remember just laying, pregnant, in a ball, sobbing, as he just drank himself into oblivion.

A: The abuse escalated, especially when he was coming down from coke, or if he had a hangover from coke.

A: He was violent when he wasn't drinking, but he was more violent when he was drinking. Any little thing would set him off. He'd wake up and want more alcohol. And then the cycle would start all over. I kept thinking in my heart that if he'd only quit drinking, then life would be a lot better. I've come to the understanding that a person is going to drink or not drink. It's their choice.

A: If you sober up a perpetrator and he doesn't have treatment for his issues, then what do you have? You have a sober perpetrator. And now he's more aware.

Q: Did you find that substance abuse got in the way of your efforts to cope with the battering or heal from other forms of abuse?

A: It got in the way a lot. I left the shelter because he bought a bag of cocaine. And so, here I was back in the same abusive relationship all over again. I wanted to be strong, and even though I wanted to be out of an abusive relationship, my addictions took me back.

A: I didn't have time to heal. Because every time you drink, then there's no emotional growth. Or you just start to look at an issue like alcoholism or domestic violence. You just start to look at the sexual assault and it's too painful. You drink to numb the pain. So it never really goes away. It's never dealt with. It just gets under the rug, and it resurfaces again and again.

A: It made it certainly harder for me to cope.

A: I first went looking for help to get away from the abuse. While I was in shelter, one of the things they very strongly enforced was no alcohol or drugs. And I was having a real hard time with the no drugs. So my pipe and all my goods and stuff stayed in my car. I'd get in my car and go down a couple of blocks, sit in a Safeway parking lot and get stoned.

A: The drugs are an element of control. If they can keep you on the drugs, using or addicted to the drugs, they're in control. And it's like strings on a puppet. They just keep you under control because you want that other hit. You want that other drink.

A: And drinking kept me in the relationship longer. When you're drinking and you're in that vicious circle, the other vicious circle doesn't matter. All I cared about was getting another drink.

A: Because of my drug use, I would not accept or see the violence. My head's not clear enough, or wasn't clear enough, to see the reality of the situation.

A: For me, once I pick up the alcohol or the other substances, it's like that safety plan goes out the window.

A: It kept me isolated, so I stayed at home in my room with the curtains drawn. On top of him keeping me isolated and not allowing me to go anywhere. But I think the biggest thing it did was kept me from getting out and getting that help I needed. Now, being clean and sober, I know it's so much easier for me to tap those resources.

Q: Did you find battering or other abuse got in the way of your efforts to recover from substance abuse? Was this ever a relapse issue?

A: Every time I thought about getting into a new relationship, I just wanted to drink.

A: I think the underlying shame that I felt, and not dealing with the sexual assaults. I didn't see that at first when I got sober. The connection didn't become clear to me until I'd been in recovery for some time.

A: Not being able to go to meetings. Not being able to get out around people who were sober.

A: Going to a meeting wouldn't be anything he would tolerate because there would be other men there. Something could happen. So his controlling made it real difficult for me to do what I needed to do for myself.

A: I made it for 30 days. The minute I got out of the safe environment I was right back with the man and by midnight, using.

A: I believe I needed more than just a 12-step program.

A: You can talk about all these wonderful spiritual things, but if you don't have any food and you don't know where you're going to sleep, and you're running for your life, you don't have time for any of that stuff. You're just stuck on survival.

A: This man tried to strangle me. After that happened, then I relapsed. And I was in relapse mode off and on for a whole year after that.

A: I think when you stop denying things that have happened in your life in the beginning, all that from the incest, then you can stop the denying of things that happened a couple of years ago. Sick relationships and the drug abuse, and the self-destruction. I think from that point on, I could start to recover.

Q: Did you get any messages from others that you were to blame for battering or other abuse?

A: Yes, I got that message from family, friends and my abuser. It was always my fault.

A: He said I was ugly. He said I was a bad wife. He said I was an unfit mother.

A: Well I told you to shut up and you wouldn't shut up. Or all you had to do was make me bacon. Or I didn't hit you that hard.

A: I chose to marry a man from the other side of the tracks. Deal with it.

A: My parents and my family, they liked him. They said it was my fault he started drinking, because I was nagging him. I wasn't treating him right. That was the reason he broke my face, broke my nose, broke my jaws. I was doing something to cause him to hit me. It was my fault.

Q: Did you believe this yourself?

A: He told me it was my fault that he hurt me. And I believed him. After all, he didn't rage at anyone else, and he didn't hit anyone else but me.

A: It just whittled away. I was told regularly if you hadn't done this, then I wouldn't have done that. Over a long period of time to the point where I thought I was crazy. And I really started to believe, if I act just right, I can keep this from happening to me.

A: Part of his abuse was brainwashing, and he was very good at it.

Q: Did you get any messages from others that you were to blame for battering, sexual assault or other abuse because of your drinking or drug use?

A: He was always saying the reason he would abuse me was because of my drug use, even though he had his drug use that was not a problem, or he would bring the drugs to me.

A: He would not admit that he was abusing me. But he was like, you did the drugs. You deserve to get your ass kicked. My mom always took his side. She was aware of my marijuana use and my cocaine use, and she'd be like, what man is going to put up with the things you do? And I got that from a lot of people. All the time it was, I deserved it because I wasn't being a good mom, I was using drugs, running around to taverns and staying up all night, and sleeping all day. Oh, yeah. Big messages.

A: I had been raped, gang raped, when I was 17 and I had been using. I didn't even realize it was rape until a woman pointed that out to me. She said any time you have sex without your consent it's a form of rape. I think that the attitude about women, if you hadn't put yourself in that situation then that wouldn't have happened to you. What did you expect?

Q: Did you believe these messages yourself?

A: Yeah, I believed it for a long time. He kept telling me I was the one who was insane, and that I was always going to be that way as long as I used the drugs. So it was my fault that I made him angry. When I'd really get into the crack I would get to the point where I'd get suicidal. And then it was him not being able to cope with my mood changes and stuff like that.

Q: When you tried to seek help for the violence, did you run into any problems? How did people respond?

A: The cops would come and they'd say, you've been together how many years? Get over it. Kiss and make up.

A: We come from a very small town, and when I got my divorce, the judge told me, we do not mention the words domestic violence in this courtroom.

A: The first time he tried to kill me, we went and saw a psychiatrist, family counseling, and I actually did kick him out of the house. The psychiatrist wanted him back in the house, told us we should be able to work it out.

A: I went to the church and told them that I was in fear for my life, and if somebody would just go with me from the church, I could get my cat and I could get my belongings. People in the congregation patted me on the head and told me, “Oh, it’s okay.” Denying that there was any abuse going on. It made me turn my back on my faith.

A: People tend to look the other way. It’s just not something they want to see. It’s denial.

Q: Were there any personal barriers that stood in the way of your getting help for the battering or sexual abuse?

A: I never thought I’d have the strength to leave. I never knew I could. I didn’t have the resources that we have now. I did not know domestic violence was against the law. I had absolutely no idea.

A: I was afraid of what life would be like alone, big time. Of the mom thing. Three children. And so finances kept me there too. I thought the only thing to do was to stay and keep on doing what I was doing. You know, domestic violence is barely out in society now. Until the police told me about the battered women’s shelter, I didn’t know there was help, and I think I was pretty unaware of substance abuse help too. I just didn’t know.

Q: What kept you from getting help for the substance abuse?

A: The feeling of isolation both being a female alcoholic, that internalized shame, and then the internalized shame I had from the domestic violence.

A: Pretty much what people would think was the biggest thing. The shame pretty much kept me from getting any kind of help that I needed. I just stayed addicted.

A: I thought alcoholics were people in the gutters, the winos pushing their shopping carts with all their belongings in it. And I figured since I had a job, a car, the whole nine yards, that I was doing pretty good.

A: I didn’t think marijuana was addictive.

A: How do you get up in the morning and not smoke a joint?

A: And denial is an awesome thing. It truly is. If you don’t want to see it, or you can’t handle it, then it simply is not happening.

Q: When you were trying to recover, did your partner ever try to put roadblocks in your way?

A: Oh yeah. Because it was really tough for me when I first quit. It was difficult the first 30, 60 days. When I talked to him on the phone, he’d always tell me, all you’ve got to do is tell me babe, and I’ll go get you some more. He kept telling me that that’s all I needed was a couple of bong hits or a couple of rocks and I’d be just fine.

A: I got clean and sober and started working, and putting money away to get out of the relationship. And I think he saw that. He became more demanding. Attempts to be controlling escalated. His abuse of the kids escalated as I was sober. His attempts seemed more desperate.

Q: What finally led you to get help for the woman abuse?

A: This man was just physically beating me up. My middle daughter was between us a lot of times, and while she was standing between us, he would reach around her and pull my hair. I walked into her bedroom to check on her, and she was hiding underneath the bed. I realized he was affecting the kids.

A: The nice periods were shorter and shorter, and the abuse got longer and longer. Just couldn't take it anymore.

A: When I was using, I didn't have the ability to reach out for help, nor did I feel I needed it. Not using made me feel again, and when I felt again, I knew I needed help, because the pain was there. And that's when I reached out. If I would continue using, I would never have reached out.

Q: What led you to get help for the substance abuse?

A: The choice of either stop using or live on the street. At this time, I was smoking crack cocaine. Because I was so devastated by the use of it, I just wanted to be really free from it.

A: Once I walked away from that abuse [violence], I knew the next thing I had to do was do something about the substance abuse. And then, when I made up my mind that I wanted to quit the drugs also, the advocates at the shelter were right there for me, and got me into a treatment program.

Q: Do you think it's important to address both violence and substance abuse together?

A: I don't think I could deal with one issue alone. It was critical that I deal with the domestic violence, to get away from it, because it was just getting worse and worse. But I couldn't deal with the domestic violence if I was still getting all drugged up.

A: You've got to be sober, at least a little bit, to be able to even look at the domestic violence. But if you get sober, and you don't look at those issues, you're not going to stay sober, not in the long run.

A: I couldn't recover from substance abuse if I was still being physically abused, mentally abused, because I would be right back to using. So they walk hand in hand. I would not recover from one unless I address the other, and vice versa.

A: Without being clean, I can't deal with the abuse issues, and without dealing with the abuse issues, I'll just go back to using.

A: Getting off the chemicals has made it much easier for me now to deal with the other situations I need to in order to get back on my feet.

Q: What has been most helpful to you in addressing both the substance abuse and the woman abuse?

A: I'm going to a domestic violence group that also addresses chemical dependency issues. The domestic violence and drug abuse have very similar qualities.

A: You have the minimizing. The denial. All that stuff that goes on with the chemical dependency, you have with domestic violence too.

A: I get a lot of support on both issues this time around.

A: Accepting suggestions and help from other people. Being clean and sober and seeing the potentials that I have.

A: Staying clean and being able to talk about what's going on really helps.

A: It helps to see that you aren't the only one. And that someone else did make it. And someone else has made a life for themselves.

A: They try to make you feel that you're not worthless or useless.

A: Somebody wanted to show me support, listen to me, not yell at me, not scream at me, just look at some options instead of that. Through them showing love to me, I began to love myself. I didn't deserve the punishment I was giving myself for all that had happened in my life. The continuous bad relationships, continuous abusing the drugs, and shame and the guilt I felt from all that. I deserved better. It was also OK to heal from all that.

A: The longer you're clean, the more you talk about it, the easier it gets. And it feels in the beginning like it's the end of the world, but it's actually the beginning of a new life.

Q: What has been your experience with support groups? Have you been encouraged to talk about both issues? How do you handle this?

A: I have a sponsor in a 12-Step program. And she is both a survivor of domestic violence, and in recovery for 14 years.

A: I'm very determined to live a violence-drug free life, so regardless of what kind of meeting I go to, I talk about what I feel I need to talk about. Anytime I talk about my domestic violence, I'm also speaking on my chemical dependency. I go to groups and I say what I feel I need to say. The meetings I go to deal with both.

A: For domestic violence survivors, women's meetings are probably safer.

A: Where it was safe to talk about both the chemical dependency and the domestic violence.

A: Especially with other women who have both issues, those who know the abuse, all aspects of the abuse.

A: The more you tell your story, the more you talk about what you did to get clean and sober, the stronger it makes you the more you hear it. And the longer we're away from the abuser, and the more education that we get, and the more we talk to other people about it, the stronger we become and the more aware.

Q: Many women have mentioned problems they encountered when they first tried to seek help. Have you done anything personally to try and change attitudes about chemical dependency or violence against women?

A: Being a sponsor in the A.A. program. Just talking with some of the new people that are coming in.

A: Just sharing it with other people in the meetings, my experience of how I am now, compared to where I was when I first realized I needed to start doing something about the problems.

A: When I'm helping other people, it's keeping me conscious of where I'm at in my program and what I'm doing to take the steps to keep myself clean and sober.

A: Because of all the stuff that I've been through, with personal journeys, the law, and the police and the court system, I want to get involved in effecting change.

A: Working with other addicts and abused women and homeless women, that's my healing every day.

A: And put DV information everywhere. I have put it everywhere I can think of. I've got it in the schools, in the libraries, in the grocery stores, in the movie theaters, in the dentist office, in the car dealerships, in the tourist information centers. You name it, I put it there.

Q: What would you say is the best thing about being both safe and sober today?

A: I've gained more confidence in myself and learned so much more about myself. It's still lonely. It's still quiet. But it's better than being drugged up and arguing and fighting all the time. I don't have to run and hide in a closet anymore.

A: I have my youngest daughter back. She lives with me. My oldest daughter is getting married, and my middle daughter is a college student. I was blessed with talking to 3,000 teenagers this fall at the convention center. No line of cocaine, no reefer, no drugs, no man, ever brought me to the feeling of being able to talk to those children.

A: I'm able to have clear thoughts. I have a sense of reality. I'm not easily swayed. It's easier for me to pick out unsafe situations and unsafe people. By being sober, I'm more aware of what's going on around me. I don't have to be in another abusive relationship and I don't have to let people treat me like that.

A: I'm a pretty intelligent person, and I never realized that. I never realized how really intelligent I was.

A: I am my own advocate, I realized.

A: I have a lot of women friends and I've never had women friends. Never.

A: I wouldn't trade where I'm at right now. I remember that feeling. I remember the withdrawals. I remember the cocaine dreams too vividly. Nightmares. Don't want to go back. Ever.

A: I am, for the first time in my 41 years dealing with life on life's terms without somebody telling me how to do it. I can actually talk to people now without being drunk. I can actually laugh without being high. And I can actually walk out a door without being paranoid. That feels good. That feels so good. Because I want to live.

Q: What would you tell other women who are experiencing substance abuse and violence?

A: That you can get out of an abusive relationship. That you can recover. That you're not alone.

A: No relationship is better than an abusive relationship.

A: And I don't think women should feel they need to make a man happy. That's a two-way street.

A: Just taking even baby steps toward asking for help. That was the biggest and most difficult thing for me to do.

A: It's hard picking up the phone, but both problems have hotline numbers. And once you do it, it just gets easier after that. And if you don't get help, it just gets worse. A lot worse. Both issues.

A: Please reach out. Talk to a peer. Talk to somebody you can talk to.

A: I can't go back. I can't truly ever return to that state of denial. I know too much now.

A: Knowledge is power. ... Knowledge is power.

Based on interviews conducted by Debi Sue Edmund and Patricia J. Bland in Springfield, IL, and Seattle, WA.

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Getting Safe and Sober: Real Tools You Can Use, Alaska Network on Domestic Violence And Sexual Assault