

“I want to tell women alcoholism is an illness and can be treated”

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Women too suffer from alcohol dependency but far fewer women compared to men, go into rehab

NEW DELHI: Gauri was 18 when she had her first drink at a casual outing with college friends. By the time she was 30, she was dependent on alcohol. Today at 41, Gauri has not only been sober for five years, but also counsels people battling alcohol abuse in rehabilitation.

By stepping out of anonymity and talking about her struggle with alcohol abuse, Gauri is challenging the stereotype around “women who drink” as well as those who “battle dependency”. “It’s still easier for a man than a woman to seek help,” she said.

“My family was a big support during my rehabilitation. I want to tell women that alcoholism is an illness and can be treated. They should prioritise recovery over stereotypes,” said Gauri, who has been working as a certified counsellor in drug and alcohol addiction for four years.



Gauri chose to challenge the stereotype around ‘women who drink’ and help other women with alcohol dependency

She reminisces about her first drink. “I remember feeling confident after having my first drink ever. It made me feel good. So, I didn’t stop,” she said with a small chuckle.

Born and brought up in a prosperous Delhi household, Gauri lived a comfortable life with her “broad-minded parents” but that necessarily didn’t mean she was telling them everything.

“That void was filled by alcohol. It started as social drinking but by the time I was 30 I realised alcohol had become a part of my schedule. Despite that realisation, heavy consumption continued for the next five years. It got so bad that my husband started stumbling upon empty bottles hidden away in the cupboard. I even started waking up early, so that I could drink a little, get a grip on my anxiety and then help my son leave for school. Then, it happened. I blacked out. I was picking up my son from school. We were in the car and I collapsed. I also had seizures,” she recalled.

“I started waking up early, so that I could drink a little, get a grip on my anxiety and then help my son leave for school

Gauri, counsellor who was once alcohol dependent

“After that I was hospitalised. I realised I was ill and needed to recuperate. My family was suffering as much as I was. I made the decision and went into rehabilitation,” she said. She goes on to add, the pride evident in her voice, “It has been five years since. I have not touched alcohol and am working as a counsellor.”

Few women approach rehab

“I was in rehab for six months, and the only woman in a group of 15 men. The same rehab went on to give me my first job as a counsellor; they wanted to encourage more women to feel comfortable in going to rehab. I have interacted with several female patients and their families, most are not willing to leave their daughters, sisters, etc. for more than 2-3 months. They don’t want the world to know,” said Gauri who is currently working as a counsellor at Sanctum Wellness and Healing, Chhatarpur (Delhi).

Why women don’t go to rehab

- Lack of family support, as being alcohol-dependent is a taboo
- Lack of access to counselling sessions despite anonymity
- Young women particularly find it hard to reach out

While compared to men, fewer women seek rehabilitation. However, the number of women coming out for treatment and counselling is on the rise, said Payal*, who has been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Delhi — a fellowship of substance-abuse survivors which organises group therapy sessions for people battling alcohol and narcotics-abuse — for over 20 years.

“I attended my first session at AA in 1998. I have been associated with the fellowship ever since. Back in 1998, I was the only woman in a group of 20 men. Today, we have at least 35-40 sessions across Delhi-NCR and while the sessions are typically male-dominated, there are at least 6-7 women per group. We have also organised some women-only sessions,” said Payal.

However, Payal admitted that some, especially young girls, find it extremely difficult to attend the sessions because they are scared their family members will not support them.

“Back in 1998, I was the only woman in a group of 20 men seeking therapy. Today, there are at least 6-7 women per group

Payal, former alcoholic and member of Alcoholics Anonymous

“Because of awareness, young girls in particular, try to get treatment but are unable to communicate with their families. They are also forced to stay hidden because they are not married yet and don’t want the dependency to impact their own prospects and marriage prospects of their siblings,” said Payal.

However, Payal said the coronavirus-induced lockdown has brought forth an opportunity as well. “We are now organising sessions online. There has been an increase in the number of sessions being held per day because more people are tuning in and people are able to attend longer sessions from the comfort of their home,” she said.

Various stakeholders TOI spoke to said that while the number of men going into rehabilitation as compared to the estimated number of male alcohol-dependents is not proportionate, the situation was particularly dismal among women.

More women are drinking & women are drinking more

Alcohol consumption in India has been on the rise. According to a World Health Organization (WHO) study, between 2010 and 2017, alcohol consumption in India increased by 38 per cent. And a significant contributor to this rise has been the steady and silent growth of female tipplers. This can be substantiated by Indian government’s Centre for Alcohol Studies which said that the women’s alcohol market is expected to grow by 25 per cent over the next 5 years.



Women as alcohol consumers in India

- Women’s alcohol market is expected to grow by 25% over next 5 years
- 45.6% women of 18-30 years have consumed four or more drinks in one session
- 44.9% women of 31-45 years have consumed three to four drinks in one session
- Binge drinking common among women of 18-30 years and 31-45 years

But does an increase in the number of alcohol consumers also mean an increase in the number of alcohol-abusers?

Dr Niharika Singh, an addiction psychiatrist at Sanctum, explained that people who are exposed to alcohol at a young age are more likely to get addicted to it. She noted that women are susceptible to become alcohol-dependent faster than men, adding that there was a genetic disposition involved.

“The difference in how substance abuse impacts a man and a woman is called telescoping. While there are less women than men who indulge in substance abuse, however, due to various psychological and biological factors, the progression from first use to dependency could be faster in a woman than a man who consumes alcohol at similar frequency and quantity,” said Dr Singh, adding that parents tend to pass their dependency to children.

“Women are susceptible to become alcohol-dependent faster than men

Dr Niharika Singh, addiction psychiatrist

A Delhi-specific survey conducted by Community Against Drunken Driving (CADD) in September 2019 throws some light on drinking patterns of women in the capital.

As per the CADD survey, 45.6 per cent women in the age group of 18-30 years agreed to have consumed four or more drinks in one session while 44.9 per cent women agreed to have consumed three to four drinks in one session in the age group of 31-45 years. The survey also concluded that binge drinking appeared to be common among women between 18-30 years and 31-45 years.



How much should women drink?

- Up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men is how the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines moderate alcohol consumption
- It’s binge drinking after 4 or more alcoholic drinks for women and 5 or more alcoholic drinks for men — within 2 hours
- Heavy alcohol consumption means binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past month

* Name has been changed for privacy